

MENTORING AS A SUPPORT MECHANISM FOR TEACHING PRACTICE BY TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring has been identified as a mechanism for supporting teaching practice, in the compulsory school and higher education contexts (Elliot, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Informal dialogue with institutions across New Zealand has identified variable systems for supporting the teaching practices of academic staff, with mentoring as one such mechanism; however with no formalised system in place. At one institute, for example, past mentoring processes have involved senior teaching staff volunteering their time and assistance to mentor less experienced staff, as required, with no procedural guidelines, no policy directing this activity and no collection of statistical data.

This paper poses questions about and outlines the current educational literature regarding the establishment and implementation of a mentoring programme for teaching staff in the higher education context, and proposes a model that aims to achieve equality of access to mentoring for all teachers. Key aspects of this discussion paper will focus on the purpose and benefits of mentoring, training for mentors and mentees, exploration of different mentoring models and the issue of access to mentoring as a support mechanism for all teachers in a higher education environment.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the purpose of mentoring is an essential step in any consequent suggestion that mentoring supports teaching. The review of research literature relevant to informing this implementation process provides a mix of agreement and discordance as to the purpose, approach and implementation of mentoring as a teacher support mechanism. For an institution wanting to implement a mentoring programme, these elements require careful consideration and clarification before programme design and implementation is entered into.

Mentoring has been awarded a variety of descriptions to define its purpose, among them induction, supervision, staff retention, inculcating organisational culture, personal and professional development. There appears to be no singular definition, but rather a concept consisting of multiple layers of meaning, application and intent. As Gibson (2004) states, a review of the literature on mentoring finds that there is neither a common description nor a consistent definition. Therefore, any consequent discussion about whether mentoring is a support mechanism for teaching practice is open to wide interpretation and debate. What is synthesised in this review of the literature is a raft of opinions about the purpose and place of mentoring and examples of mentoring practices, with minimal research to substantiate these opinions.

A number of systems and processes can be viewed as supporting teaching practices by academic teaching staff, such as performance management systems, induction and orientation programmes, peer observation and mentoring (Petersen, 2007). Based on this literature review on mentoring in higher education contexts (Petersen, 2006), a current study on mentoring in a New Zealand higher education institution is underway using action research methodology and framed by critical educational theory (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This study aims to explore whether mentoring for teachers supports their teaching practices and therefore whether mentoring needs to be a formal support mechanism embedded within the organisation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain, underpinning theory provides a rationale which can clarify meaning, arm against criticism and promote future progress. No clear theoretical framework has been mentioned in the literature about teacher mentoring. Little (1990, cited in Feiman-Nemser, 1996) found few comprehensive studies well-informed by theory and designed to examine in depth the context, content and consequences of mentoring. Yet creating a framework within which mentoring is derived would provide, and perhaps substantiate, a more definitive purpose and process for implementation of a programme as a support mechanism for teaching practice across the institution, as well as rigorously informing mentoring practices.

A recent enquiry (Petersen, 2006) into the literature examined how much research evidence was available to substantiate or refute mentoring as a mechanism for supporting critically reflective teaching practice. It was discovered that a number of authors believe there is a need for more and in-depth research. Gradually, more research is being undertaken in this area (Feiman-Nemser, 1996), but what is interesting is that the published research focuses only on mentoring of beginning/new teachers. A minority of authors mention – not backed up by research – mentoring as being able to meet the needs of the more experienced teacher, however they touch only briefly on this.

By viewing educational theory and educational practice as congruent rather than different (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), this congruency can provide a framework that establishes meaning and a clear purpose for people involved in mentoring, with regard to the process and actions which they engage in as mentors and/or mentees. Critical theory assists the participants in critical analysis and development of educational practice as they experience it.

DEFINING MENTORING TO ESTABLISH IT'S PURPOSE

A number of authors suggest that the enthusiasm for mentoring has not been matched by clarity about the purposes of mentoring (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Sweeney, 2003). Feiman-Nemser questions whether mentoring is viewed by the institution as a support function or a judge of the new teacher's performance for the purpose of employment or certification, which introduces another question, "Is the purpose of mentoring to mainly support new, inexperienced teachers?" According to a number of authors, including Feiman-Nemser and Sweeney, this is a common purpose of mentoring in education.

A prevalent theme through the literature is the new teacher being assisted with classroom management skills. However some authors expand this purpose to include other factors such as helping with managing professional development, managing the expectations of research and the expectations of scholarly activities (Boswell, 2004). McKinley (as cited in Boswell, 2004) builds on this further as he talks of the mentor role "encompassing active leadership in addition to confirmation of classroom skills and academic responsibilities" (p. 1).

The concept of a larger framework for determining the purpose of mentoring is picked up by Sweeney (2003), who talks about 'expanding the definition of purpose', viewing mentoring as directed at creating a more professional culture, where staff are continually learning on the job, where collaboration and openness to feedback are the norm. As he states, "creating a more professional culture is an achievable outcome of a more professional approach to mentoring" (p. 1). Kanuka (2005) reflects this, stating that mentoring programmes can help develop more collegial and compassionate departments and institutions.

Another common theme occurring in the literature is mentoring for the purpose of retention of new teachers. Although the issue of retention is not directly reflective of the theme of this paper, retention can be a significant by-product of effective teacher mentoring and a key consideration for an organisation. Bullard (1998) and the New York

State Education Department (NYSED) (2005) comment on the efficacy of mentoring programmes as achieving the highest quality and personalised support in assisting new teachers to practice effectively and point out that this type of support has also consistently shown to be effective in stemming new teacher attrition.

An additional perspective offered by Sweeney (1994) is that mentoring can also be a tool for retaining excellent experienced staff [acting as mentors] as they are involved in an environment where their contributions are valued and responded to. The more altruistic goal of teachers feeling valued and supported in their practice can be congruent with the economic goal of retention.

Sweeney (1994) makes a direct link between the purpose of mentoring and the resulting benefits for teachers. He believes questions that need to be asked when deciding the purpose of a mentoring programme include “What is the greatest potential benefit of mentoring?” and “How can we capture that benefit for all our staff?” (p. 1). So, for an institution to establish a mentoring system with the aim to support teaching practice, it needs to be clear in deciding who will be involved and therefore benefit from mentoring. This implies that defining the purpose and place of mentoring, which can then help guide decisions about how mentoring may be embedded in the organisation.

BENEFITS

Although research-based evidence regarding the benefits and consequences of mentoring is not extensive in the literature, numerous authors offer examples from their own perspective and, in some cases, the perspectives of mentors and mentees, which indicate beneficial results.

There is an obvious commonality within the literature with regard the benefits for the mentor. For example, the mentee can be a catalyst for the mentor’s professional development (Huling & Resta, 2001) and for stimulating the mentor’s personal self-reflection and providing an impetus for professional development (National Education Association, 2004). Huling and Resta gathered feedback from mentors regarding how

they view the benefits, offering quotes such as, “Mentoring has forced me to be reflective about my own beliefs about teaching, students and learning and teaching as a career”, and “Continued contact with mentees provides some of my richest collegial interactions” (p. 2).

These comments are reflected in Rowley’s (1999) opinion that the mentor benefits by developing multiple methods of classroom observation and employing research-based frameworks as the basis for reflection and refining their feedback skills. However, Huling and Resta (2001) point out that since 1986, only a few studies have actually focused on the primary question of mentor benefits.

The theme of mentoring for benefiting the organisation is also prevalent in the literature, emphasising the impact of mentoring on organisational culture, formal policy and the general health of the organisation. Young and Perrewé (2004) emphasise that the perceived value of mentoring in the organisation can be made clear through all types of communication mechanisms, including formal policy, reward systems and recognition for participation. They state, “An organisation’s culture that fosters perceptions that mentoring is accessible perhaps creates a feeling about possible openness, acceptance and a sense of social support” (p. 120). Sweeney (2003) also identifies a significant result of mentoring as “the passing of organisational values and beliefs from one generation to the next” (p. 1). However, he does not elaborate on whether this is a beneficial result or not.

What is not evidenced in the literature are the benefits for the mentee, rather perceptions and assumed outcomes as a result of being involved in the mentoring process. There is an implicit assumption in much of the literature that by explaining the activities a mentee engages in with a mentor, such as classroom observation, career development and induction to the organisational culture, the mentee naturally benefits from such advice and guidance. Little is offered regarding benefits as perceived by the mentee themselves.

The National Education Association (NEA) (2004) proposes that mentees [new teachers] need to recognise the value of mentoring and be receptive to the advice and counsel of a more experienced person whom they respect and admire. Their discussion does not identify what processes or systems can help the mentee realise this value and also raises the question of how a new teacher can be expected to have this level of respect and admiration when they are new to the organisation. The importance of careful attention being paid to mentor selection and training and new teachers being paired with mentors who are already reformers in their institution is emphasised by Feiman-Nemser (1996) who criticises mentoring for its potential to promote conventional norms and practices, with new teachers running the risk of picking up less effective approaches.

MENTORING MODELS

There is much debate in the literature as to the value for organisations establishing a formal model of mentoring as opposed to relying on informal, voluntary interactions between teaching staff. If a mentoring programme is informal and voluntary, the same individuals who choose to participate may also be individuals who are committed to teaching (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Although it is not clear if Ingersoll and Kralik are referring to the mentor, mentee or both, this raises an interesting issue of self-selection. However, if the mentoring model advocates a mandatory system, would this create issues of ‘buy-in’ by teachers who see no need for being mentored or becoming a mentor for others?

The issue of power is predominant in this part of the discussion, particularly with regard to the use of traditional models of mentoring. McGuire and Reger (2003) believe moving away from the traditional model of an experienced teacher mentoring a protégé is a necessity if a power balance is to be achieved. As they state, “Traditional mentoring relationships reinforce power imbalances between participants because one person in the relationship has a monopoly of knowledge, skills and resources, making it difficult for the mentee to find their own intellectual niche as they have a reluctance to challenge their mentors because of the unequal power” (p. 54).

Other forms of mentoring are suggested within the literature, advocating for this move from a traditional model. For example, the group mentoring approach can be viewed as more egalitarian and less structured learning partnerships between multiple learners, having more potential for fostering workplace learning than the more traditional mentoring dyad (Balatti, 2001). Ritchie (1999) provides a slightly different perspective, suggesting that group mentoring has the potential for practising three forms of mentoring relationships: individual, peer and co-mentoring. This model can be seen as encouraging collaboration and co-learning across the institution in comparison to the dyad relationship which can be problematic in terms of male/female dynamics, lack of available mentors and possibly losing the mentor a mentee may be relying on.

The co-mentoring model fosters an equal balance of power between participants and seeks to integrate emotion into the academic professional experience (McGuire, 2003). Each person in the co-mentoring relationship has the opportunity to occupy the role of teacher and learner. McGuire & Reger (2003) and Woodd (1997) emphasise the need for a peer mentoring model, where two people have a learning need or goal in common and work collaboratively to meet joint needs. The main benefit is identified as a lack of hierarchy which in turn facilitates communication, mutual support and the collaboration necessary for effective learning. Vance and Olson (1997) contrast the 'expert-to-novice' model to 'peer-collegial' mentor relationships, stating that "peers are pivotal mentors throughout our lives" (p. 253).

The 'buddy system' is often described as a mentoring approach that involves a senior teacher with little or no mentor training pairing up with a new teacher (Moir, 2006). It is also described as having an inherent danger, in the mentor possibly introducing the new teacher to the norms and expectations of the institution, but with no training or resources to link mentoring to the norms and expectations inherent in excellent teaching. Although still explaining this process as 'a senior teacher mentoring the new teacher', Wahl (2003) identifies the buddies in a mentoring programme as a network of gifted veteran professors throughout the university, who can help junior colleagues improve their classroom performance.

More prevalent in this literature review, however, is the opinion that mentoring moves beyond buddying in depth of meaning and purpose but requires training to do so. The buddy system is described as an informal mentoring mechanism in addition to formally assigned mentors for the new teacher.

Whichever model is used as the framework for a mentoring programme, the focus of why mentoring occurs is still pivotal in creating meaning and purpose for the participants and the institution. Zachary (2000) talks of grounding the mentoring relationship consciously and conscientiously in learning, believing this will likely lead to a dramatic improvement in the learning relationship for both mentoring partners. Emphasising the benefits for both participants must be integral in an institute-wide programme, whether formal or informal in nature, if buy-in and meaning are to be achieved.

THE NEED FOR TRAINING

One of the conditions to maintain an effective mentoring programme is the institution establishing clear criteria for mentor selection that includes a commitment to initial and ongoing mentor training (Rowley, 1999; Barrett, 2002).

There is a range of opinions and programmes cited in the literature regarding mentor training and an apparent gap is the minimal reference to or published research highlighting the need for training for the mentee. Sweeney (2003) and Degenais (2003) are two authors suggesting that this continuum of support and training is as important for the protégé (mentee) as for the mentor, to address ongoing needs and sustain continuous professional development of both partners.

As discussed earlier in this paper, Feiman-Nemser (1996) advocates mentor training and provision of ongoing support for the mentors through the mentoring process. Successful mentor programmes are dependent upon the quality of training afforded the mentors (Ganser, 1996; Ganser & Koskela, 1997, cited in Weiss & Weiss, 1999).

Where mentor training does feature in the literature, there is much support for ongoing training for the mentor (Feiman-Nemser, 1994; Barrett, 2002; Sweeney, 2003). As well as initial mentor training, it should provide opportunities for mentors to interact with each other and develop supportive relationships. Barrett talks of mentor training and supervision as a key benefit for the experienced teacher's professional development, indicating that this opportunity for development hinges on being a mentor. He describes the purpose of this training as enabling the mentor to 'delve deeply into themselves' when examining the processes that occur with the mentee during an interaction. Sweeney also believes that this ongoing nature helps mentors to shift their focus from helping the new teacher learn the curriculum to supporting the new teacher's professional development, particularly in use of strategies for improving individual and student group learning, and assessment.

With a focus on the mentor, Barrett (2002) believes research needs to be allocated to help understand why mentor development training is not seen as important as the role the mentor plays in the professional development of others.

IMPLEMENTING A MENTORING PROGRAMME

Numerous guidelines for implementing teacher mentoring programmes are offered in the literature. An article from the NYSED (2005) focuses on the need for planning, deciding on the desired outcomes which are clearly defined for the mentor, mentee and wider institute, construction of a knowledge-base upon which to base the design of the programme and the development of programme evaluation models. The NYSED also suggest that a mentoring programme would benefit from being coordinated by an identified person or small group.

Others vocal in the area of variables that will influence the success or demise of an institute-wide mentoring programme include Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) who suggest a number of variables, such as duration, intensity, number of new teachers who will receive mentoring and the selection, preparation, assignment and compensation of mentors. This

thinking is reflected by Elliott (2000) as he states, “Effective programmes are characterised by strong leadership and management. Programmes that are not well planned can be counter-productive” (p 7).

Programme developers need to create optimal conditions rather than optimal matches between the mentor and mentee (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). What these conditions might comprise is not offered however. The NEA (2004) suggests that in structured programmes where pairings of mentor and mentee are assigned or forced, there is a greater chance that mismatching will occur. However, the NEA also does not elaborate on whether there are alternative approaches to resolving this issue.

These comments and opinions of various authors continue to highlight the need for further exploration, to provide some research-based evidence to support and corroborate the need for mentoring as supporting teaching practice.

ACCESS TO MENTORING

Who receives mentoring? Who should receive mentoring? There are multiple references to mentoring for the new teacher; however, as mentioned earlier in this paper, minimal attention is given to mentoring for the experienced teacher. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1982) defines the term mentor as “experienced and trusted advisor” (p. 633) and a protégé as “a person to whom another is protector or patron” (p. 828). This latter definition does not distinguish the protégé as ‘new’ or ‘less experienced’, therefore surely the protégé could be an experienced teacher who requires another’s experience to assist them.

A few authors specifically mention the need of experienced teachers to receive mentoring (Gibson, 2004; Elliott, 2000; Shrewsbury Mentoring Programme (SMP), 2005). Gibson makes the salient point that the type of mentoring needed will vary according to different points in a faculty member’s career, based on that faculty member’s needs at the time. If we are to concur with the literature that identifies multiple purpose and meaning of mentoring for the new teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Kanuka, 2005; Rowley, 1999), this multiplicity is surely as relevant and significant for the experienced teacher.

From this literature review, there appears to be no recognition of the experienced teacher who requests mentoring because they identify this as an integral aspect of their ongoing professional development, career enhancement and/or interpersonal needs in their job. Instead, Elliott (2000) suggests that this type of mentoring would be on a more informal basis, that is, dependent on the experienced teacher requesting mentoring help to “improve their performance level” (p. 18) and the Shrewsbury Mentoring Programme (2005) make the statement that “the experienced staff member has been identified as needing improvement and support in some of their teaching” (p. 1). There seems to only be a necessity for mentoring if these experienced practitioners ‘fit’ a particular criteria or category of performance need.

There is an inference in this area of the literature that teachers who choose not to be mentors will have less opportunity for professional development. There is a definite gap in the literature regarding mentoring for the experienced teacher, strongly indicating the need for further research.

THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

“To inform mentoring policy and practice, we need more direct studies of mentoring and its effect on the teacher. We need to know more about how mentors work with mentees in productive ways, what structures and resources enable that work and how mentoring fits in the wider framework of professional development and accountability” (Feiman-Nemser, 1996, p. 3).

Supporting Feiman-Nemser’s (1996) advocacy for more studies of mentoring, Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) stress the importance and validity of studies that collect similar outcome data from both participants and non-participants in a mentoring programme, emphasising the need for such a study to establish whether participants perform differently from non-participants. Having reviewed 10 studies regarding the mentoring of new teachers they summarise their findings as “it was clear that content, delivery and

duration of the mentoring programmes were so varied that general conclusions about mentoring cannot be drawn from any given study” (p. 3).

McGuire and Reger (2003) offer more general conclusions about research to date, stating, “Mentoring influences an academic’s level of professional activity and productivity” and “Most of our understanding about mentoring comes from research that focuses on a particular kind of relationship – one involving an older, experienced person and a younger, less-experienced person” (p. 55). These statements appear narrow and unsubstantiated, supporting Ingersoll and Kralik’s (2004) view that many research studies on mentoring lack methodological rigour. Ingersoll and Kralik also offer an interesting observation that has not been considered by the other literature, when they state that there is little research investigating the negative effects of mentoring. For example, there can be an inherent danger of relying on mentors to pass on their teaching practices regardless of whether they are effective or not.

Woodd (1997) supports this thinking, commenting on the lack of research that provides a judgement between those mentored and those not. Woodd, Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) and Feiman-Nemser (1996) bring in other dimensions for the research to consider.

A MODEL FOR MENTORING: EQUALITY OF ACCESS

Zachary (2000) emphasises the need for a mentoring programme to be based on a foundation of learning; other authors proclaim a place for alternative approaches to the traditional model of mentoring. In response to the literature, a proposed model is ‘Co-Mentoring’, an emergent model based on a reciprocal framework that aims to establish an equality of access to mentoring for both the new and experienced teacher.

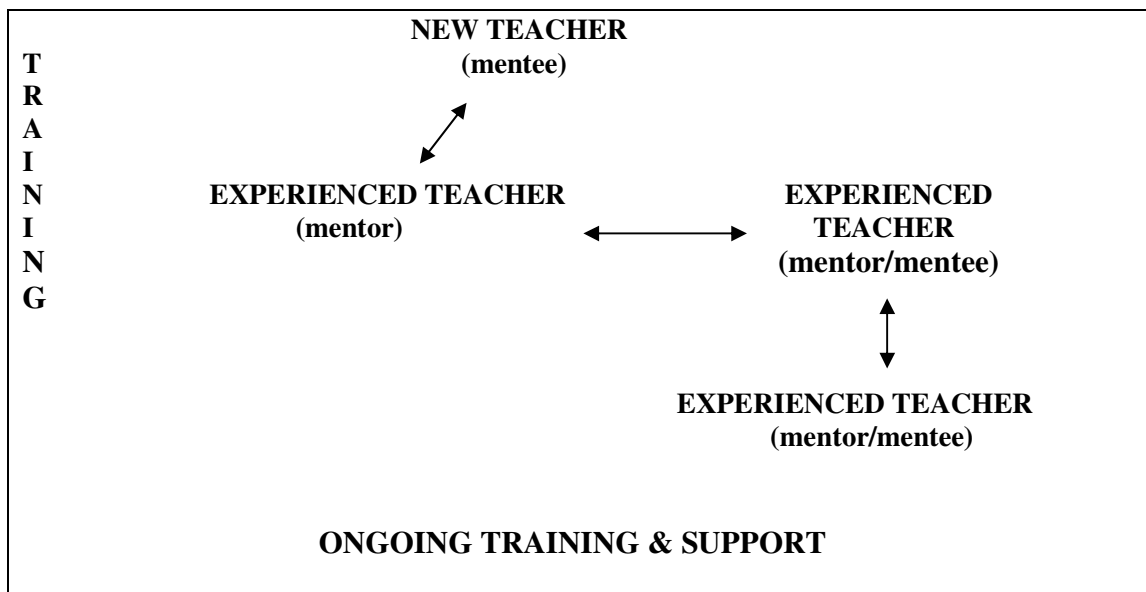


Figure 1: Co-Mentoring: An Equality of Access

Whether a new teacher or an experienced teacher with years of practice, all participants are colleagues within the institution and will have varying needs that mentoring can assist with. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1982) does not define mentoring as hierarchical, yet the literature reveals a paucity of thinking about mentoring being anything other than hierarchical. The literature has revealed a number of tensions in the area of mentoring, and highlighted significant gaps with regard to mentoring for the experienced teacher and training for both mentor and mentee.

CONCLUSION

The literature summarised in this paper has provided initial research data for a recent enquiry into mentoring as a support mechanism for teaching practices in the New Zealand higher education context (Petersen, 2006). The literature has identified a commonality of perspectives relating to the purpose and benefits of mentoring teachers whilst also highlighting how much debate this topic can engender. It is evident that further research is essential if mentoring is to be acknowledged as a valid mechanism for supporting teaching practices. The need for research is not confined to one or two areas of this concept either. Whether it is discovering if teachers benefit from mentoring, if

training must be an integral aspect of the mentoring system or which model is most effective for an organisation, each of these aspects require evidence-based data before mentoring can move from a conception and perception to a valid reality of being a support mechanism for teaching practice by teachers in higher education contexts.

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