

Enhancing Student Care Quality by Director Training and Collegial Mentoring

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Abstract- Although considerable evidence confirms that a director with good leadership and administrative skills is vital for developing and sustaining a high-quality child care program, many directors assume the role with little management experience or training. This paper reports on a training program in Canada that combined a formal curriculum to increase director administrative knowledge and skills with a mentoring component emphasizing peer support and collegial learning, delivered in a way that enabled participants to continue working full time. 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.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most research to identify predictors of good quality center-based child care has focused on adult-child ratio, group size, teacher general education, and teacher early childhood training. Similarly, much of the discussion about enhancing child care centers “has been about the professional development of teachers and not about those who supervise them”. Yet several studies report that directors’ leadership skills and administrative practices have a significant impact on classroom quality. This study reports the results from a director administrative training program, Mentoring Pairs for Child Care (MPCC). Development, implementation, and evaluation of MPCC were funded by the government of Ontario, Canada, as part of a strategy to enhance the quality of the province’s child care centers.

‘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.

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.

If ACP activated with a collagen scaffold is used to treat a full-thickness integumentary wound, then a decrease in wound healing time will occur compared to the stand-alone collagen and control (current standard of wound care).

II. METHODOLOGY 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.

Mentor was responsible for protecting, educating, teaching, guiding. 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’ 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.

Several studies report an association between administrative and program quality (Bloom et al., 2016; Bloom & Sheerer, 2017; Lower & Cassidy, 2018; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2018a; Phillips et al., 2012). However, these studies used a variety of methods to measure administrative quality. The release of the Program Administration Scale (PAS), described later in this study, provided the child care community with its first objective, standardized, and validated tool to measure the quality of a center’s administrative practices (Talan & Bloom, 2014). To date it has been used to evaluate administrative quality in two published studies.

III .THE CURRENT STUDY

PROJECT RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Effective child care center administration requires a body of administrative knowledge and skills that goes beyond that obtained through basic early childhood teacher training. Nevertheless, a survey of 564 directors in 25 American states reports that one-third had not completed any college coursework in administration (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership,). A similar situation exists in Canada, which influenced the Ontario government’s decision to fund MPCC’s development and evaluation. The study’s three research questions were: (a) To what extent did graduation

from MPCC enhance directors’ administrative practices? (b) To what extent did graduation from MPCC enhance the classroom global quality in directors’ centers? (c) Did the MPCC study groups result in local director support networks that continued after graduation?

PROGRAM DESIGN

The parameters for MPCC were established by the funder’s stipulation that the program (a) use an administrative curriculum that was accepted by all the community colleges on the project’s Advisory Committee,

(b) establish mentoring relationships among participants, and (c) be accessible to directors regardless of their location. Its design was informed by and built upon two other initiatives to enhance child care center quality. One was the director administrative training model developed by Paula Jorde Bloom and her colleagues at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University and used in its two director administration training programs. The other was the Partners in Practice Mentoring Model, which was successfully field-tested with experienced directors mentoring newer directors. MPCC’s design also included unique components to address the funder’s specific requirements.

THE MCCORMICK CENTER DIRECTOR TRAINING MODEL

The McCormick training model is grounded in adult learning theory and a social systems approach to organizational change. Consistent with adult learning theory, the instructor’s role is expanded beyond conveying information to include encouraging discussion among participants as well as their active involvement in designing learning experiences that meet their needs. Each training participant is provided a mentor hired by the program. Using the social systems approach, mentors guide their mentees through examining their center’s social system, identifying issues that need to be addressed, analyzing the potential impact of different alternatives to organizational change, and developing a quality enhancement plan.

The McCormick model provided MPCC’s developers with an example of effective incorporation of adult learning theory, a social systems approach to understanding organizational

change, and mentoring in a program that also includes a formal curriculum.

THE PARTNERS IN PRACTICE (PIP) MENTORING MODEL

The PIP Mentoring Model is based on two principles: (a) excellence in early childhood education requires reflective practitioners and (b) effective mentoring requires valuing the knowledge, skills, and uniqueness that each member brings to the relationship; open dialogue; a nonjudgmental approach; and honest, respectful, and supportive feedback . PIP uses strategies and materials that serve as the focus of mentoring discussions, including journaling, conferencing, site visits, and analyzing a situation in a center through a cause-and-effect diagram. The PIP model provided MPCC with a vision of effective mentoring relationships and various materials and strategies to focus discussions between mentors and mentees.

MULTIPLE TRAINING LOCATIONS

MPCC's design also was influenced by the funder's stipulation that the program be accessible to directors regardless of their location. Although Ontario is Canada's most populous province with several large urban areas (and associated suburban and rural areas), it is also characterized by sparsely populated northern regions and southern rural areas. Provisions for this uneven population distribution were built into the program design to enable MPCC to be provided in local areas regardless of their location.

IV. METHOD

MPCC'S UNIQUE PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Although MPCC is informed by the McCormick and PIP models, two of its components are unique: its use of occupational standards for center administrators as the foundation for its curriculum and its emphasis on collegial mentoring instead of matching participants with mentors hired by the program.

THE OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR CHILD CARE ADMINISTRATORS.

The Occupational Standards for Child Care Administrators document, which was developed through extensive consultation with the child care sector across Canada (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2006), served as the foundation for the MPCC curriculum. It addresses six key

director responsibilities: child development and care, human resources, financial, facilities, family and community relations, and governance. Each area of responsibility is subdivided into related tasks that must be completed for competency in that area.

In turn, each task includes subtasks, each of which has a list of essential knowledge and required skills and abilities. For example, the two tasks identified for child development and care are (1) develops and implements children's programs and (2) creates child-centered environments. The first task has six subtasks: (a) develops and implements a philosophy of early childhood education and care, (b) applies pedagogical guidelines, (c) provides programming support to staff, (d) develops philosophies and practices for meeting children's needs, and (e) evaluates programs. For the first subtask, one component of required knowledge is awareness of the environmental and cultural influences on child development; among the required skills is the ability to create a philosophy by consulting and involving stakeholders, such as center staff and children's families.

To create the MPCC, the standards document was supplemented by written materials and required activities related to leadership and administration theory and practice and to developing a center's mentoring culture. In 2013 the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council updated the original 2006 standards used by MPCC and expanded them to address additional key areas. The updated standards are available to the general public and may be downloaded free of charge.

Collegial Mentoring. Unlike the usual practice in training programs whereby each participant is matched with a nonparticipant mentor hired by the program, MPCC participants were matched to form mentor-mentee pairs.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Kwan and Lopez-Real (2010) described the role of the mentor in three categories: the "pragmatic" role, the "supportive and complementary" role and the "managerial" role. The pragmatic role of a mentor includes being "an observer, a provider of feedback and an instructor". Those such as Cordingley and Onchwari and Keengwe 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, 2010). Mentors are always in a fluid state between leading and following as the process of mentoring is never linear. According to Onchwari and Keengwe (2015), 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.

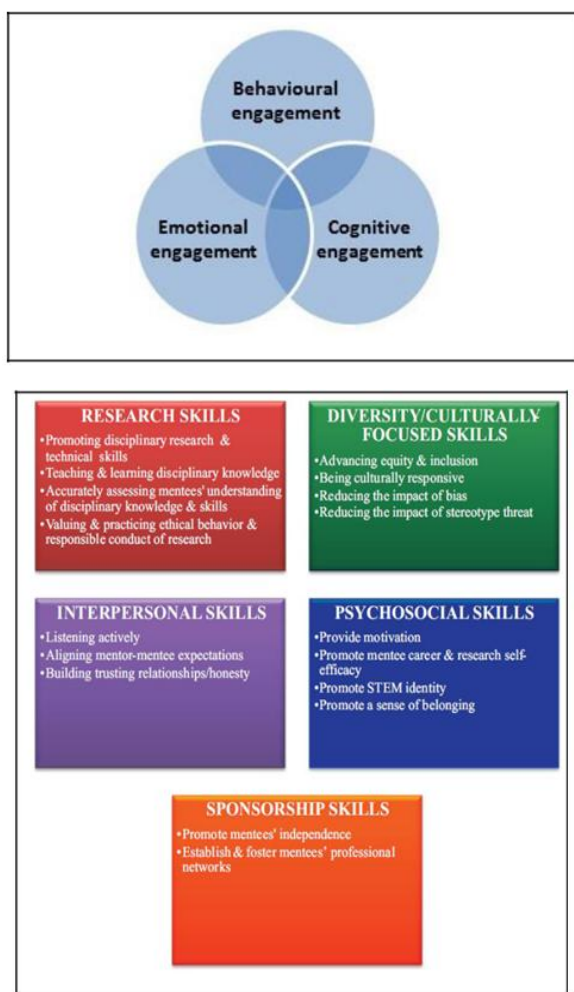


Figure: Three dimensions of mentoring

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

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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.

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) .

CONCLUSION

We hope that a new generation of nurturing care programs will benefit from these recommendations. The majority of recommendations are ones that all researchers and implementers can adopt in their current work. Future goals are worth keeping in mind as the field progresses We are mindful of the many challenges that implementers face as they seek to expand scale and sustainability of programs while enhancing demand and program quality and attending to costs. Reporting these challenges and how they were managed will further future work.

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