Mentors as Teachers, Learners, and Leaders

by Marcy Whitebook and Dan Bellm

A New Wave of Mentoring Programs in the United States

Early childhood teachers face increasing standards and expectations about what they should know and be able to do in promoting children's early learning and development. This has led to a dramatic surge in the types and numbers of mentoring opportunities currently operating in the early care and education field. Mentoring is a *relationship-based* adult learning strategy intended to promote and support a teacher's awareness and refinement of her professional learning process and teaching practices. Historically, mentoring has been thought of as a strategy to support new teachers, often within the context of their pursuit of higher education, but mentoring now takes place in a wider range of settings, with variations in mentoring goals and mentor-protégé

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relationships. Most mentoring programs today are designed in the service of quality improvement and are supported by a blend of public and philanthropic dollars. Mentoring:

- can take place in a mentor's work setting, perhaps as a component of a protégé's participation in formal training or coursework.
- can take place in a protégé's work setting.
- may be voluntary.
- may be a required element of one's job or of a center's participation in a quality improvement initiative.
- may have fairly general and broad goals.
- may have narrowly defined or even prescriptive goals — for example, focused on preparing for an assessment or evaluation, improving a test score, or learning how to use a certain classroom tool or curriculum.
- can occur over a relatively short period of time, in relation to a specific goal.
- may be a year-long or multi-year process.

The structure of a mentoring program can have implications for how mentors are expected to do their work, who their protégés are, and why the protégés are participating. (See Chart 1 for a summary of the variations among mentoring programs.)

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In order to reflect the changing mentoring terrain, and the multiple contexts in which mentoring now occurs, we felt that the time was right for a completely new version of an *Early Childhood Mentoring Curriculum* (first released in 1997, co-authored with Patty Hnatiuk). Our 2013 book, *Supporting Teachers as Learners: A Guide for Mentors and Coaches in Early Care and Education,* is intended for all who work as mentors or in other roles to educate and support teachers and family child care providers in their practice with children. As with early childhood teachers in general, mentors face increasing expectations about what they should know and be able to do in promoting early childhood practitioner's learning and development. Yet

only about half the states have identified competencies for mentors and coaches, and many mentors are called upon to assume the complex task of supporting teachers as learners without appropriate preparation and support for their role.[1]

In this article we address three aspects of mentoring — mentors as teachers, mentors as learners, and mentors as leaders — that we believe are essential for developing a skilled corps of mentors who are charged with helping teachers of young children improve their practice.

Some Definitions and a Note on Terminology

While the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching' are often used interchangeably, there can be significant distinctions between these two roles. *Mentors* tend to focus on the development of an individual teacher, and goals for the mentoring process are typically agreed upon mutually between the mentor and protégé — although mentoring relationships may differ, depending on the structure and intention of particular mentoring programs. In contrast, *coaches* may work either with individuals or with classroom teams as a group, and/or may have a set agenda for classroom improvement.

Often, however, the distinctions between mentoring and coaching become blurred in practice. In this article, as in our book, *Supporting Teachers as Learners*, we use the terms 'mentor' and 'mentoring' for the sake of consistency — but we provide concepts and activities that are relevant for mentors, coaches, and others in technical assistance and support roles. We also use the term 'protégé' for the person with whom a mentor works; other terms that are sometimes used in the field are 'mentee,' 'peer,' or 'apprentice.' (See Chart 2 — Core Principles of Mentoring.)

Mentors as Teachers

Having a particular skill — even if we are highly proficient at it — doesn't necessarily mean that we can pass it on to someone else. Being a great baker or cook is probably a prerequisite for hosting a TV cooking show, but it certainly doesn't guarantee high ratings. The successful television chef doesn't just demonstrate her skills; she can describe what she's doing as she goes, taking us through the steps in an accessible way. The clarity and style of her actions and explanations are what draw us in as viewers.

So it is, too, with a good early childhood mentor. Mentors are 'articulate practitioners'[2] who not only can demonstrate excellent skills with young children, families, and other adults in the early learning environment, but also talk about their skills and practices meaningfully with others. By bringing their own thinking and practice to light, mentors help protégés to become more articulate practitioners themselves.

To take one example: a mentor can demonstrate how she facilitates children's pre-math skills as they 'play store' in the dress-up corner — *and* she can explain the thinking behind her words and actions, as well as why she may have rejected other possible strategies. In doing so, she not only provides direct experience and information for her protégé, but she is modeling the cognitive and decision-making processes that underlie good teaching and its connection to how children learn. To be an effective teacher of adults, a mentor requires foundational knowledge about, and experience with, children and pedagogy. But the mentor toolkit also must include an ability to describe how and why she approaches teaching young children in particular ways, an understanding of how adults learn, and strategies to promote change.

Mentors as Learners

An effective mentor is committed to her own growth and development as a teacher of adults, and is willing to learn new skills and reflect upon her practice working with teachers of young children. A key part of her job is to periodically assess her own knowledge and skills in relation to working with protégés, and to identify her own ongoing learning goals. Because mentoring is both relationship-based and content-based, mentors need to consider their competence and needs for professional development in both arenas.

Mentoring should take place within an open and warm relationship, founded in mutual respect for what each person brings to the process, but it is more than this: it is a finely-tuned balance of support and challenge, focused on encouraging reflection, change, and growth. Most mentors will likely consider their skills very developed in some areas of relationship building, only somewhat developed in others, and perhaps not yet developed in others. For example, a mentor may feel she has a good grasp on principles of adult learning, and feel confident in assessing her protégé's teaching practices and identifying areas of strength and potential improvement. But she may feel less secure in navigating the dynamics of the mentor-protégé relationship and the context in which it occurs, particularly if the protégé's stated needs and goals do not align with her stage of teacher development and/or the goals of the mentoring program. Or a mentor may find herself working with a protégé whose ethnicity or culture is different from her own, leading her to recognize that she has not yet developed skills in asking and learning about her protégé's cultural traditions, and how they influence her approach to teaching.

Mentors are often expected to help their protégés strengthen various aspects of classroom management and children's

Chart 1 — Variations in Mentoring Programs

There are a number of ways in which mentoring programs can differ:

Mentoring programs can vary in overall purpose to:

- provide collegial support through informal peer relationships.
- support the attainment of higher education (e.g., as a student teaching placement) and/or teacher certification.
- support protégés who are new to the field.
- improve retention of new and/or experienced teachers.
- help translate coursework theory into classroom practice.
- further a quality improvement initiative, such as a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) or the pursuit of program accreditation.
- help implement a curriculum or training model.

The program's desired outcomes may be to:

- achieve higher quality ratings or classroom assessment scores.
- improve specific instructional practices (such as those focused on early literacy).
- improve specific child outcomes (such as language development).

Mentors have varying work settings and job descriptions. They may:

- work within the same organization as protégés (for example, as a Head Start mentor-coach or within the same school district) or in a different organization.
- or may not be currently employed as classroom teachers.
- visit protégés' classrooms, or have protégés visit their classrooms.
- work with individual protégés or with classroom teams (the latter generally being a 'coaching' model).
- work with one protégé or with multiple protégés at a time.
- work with protégés who teach a variety of age groups of children within the birth-to-age-8 spectrum.
- work with protégés within a wide variety of time frames, from a matter of weeks or months to a year or more.
- be expected to include directors in various mentoring activities, or may have little involvement with directors.

Individual mentor-protégé goals and activities may be:

- collaboratively developed by the mentor and protégé, or prescribed by the mentoring initiative.
- wide-ranging in scope, or focused on particular content areas or skills.

Protégés may have varying reasons to participate in mentoring, such as:

- by choice, or as a required part of the job.
- as a component (required or not) of a degree or training program.
- as a mandate because of classroom quality ratings or other assessments.

From *Supporting Teachers as Learners: A Guide for Mentors and Coaches in Early Care and Education* by Marcy Whitebook and Dan Bellm, with Diana Schaack. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, 2013.

learning, and no mentor is likely to consider herself an articulate practitioner in all of them. A mentor may assess her skills as well developed in promoting three- and four-year-old children's social and emotional development, but not in doing the same with infants and toddlers. Or she may consider herself effective in promoting children's literacy, but not their mathematical or scientific thinking. Even if she assesses herself as competent to 'do' something with children in one area, she may not feel she knows how to bring her own process to light for her protégé to consider.

A mentoring program, ideally, will actively help mentors develop strategies and access resources to address their ongoing development and effectiveness, by attending to various domains of the mentor's learning environment, including:

■ **teaching supports** — whether the program structure assigns a manageable number of protégés to each mentor, and allows mentors sufficient opportunities to observe and meet with them.

■ **learning community** — the program provides regular opportunities for learning and practicing mentoring skills and a designated person to help mentors identify specific learning objectives and strategies to achieve them.

■ **job crafting** — whether mentors have the authority to select or adapt mentoring strategies based on the mentor's assessment of a protégé's learning needs.

■ **adult well-being**, whether mentors receive appropriate compensation and benefits, and have fair and respectful working relationships.

■ **program leadership** — whether mentors have regular access to a supervisor or coordinator who is knowledgeable about teaching both children and adults, familiar with their skills as mentors, and understands the challenges they face with protégés.

Mentors as Leaders

Mentors are uniquely situated at the intersection between where children are taught and cared for, where teachers and providers are educated and trained, and where early education policy is made. Mentors see the action close up, and thus their perspective on how protégés are faring is a very important one. They are positioned, for example, to assess how realistic the mentoring program's objectives are, based on protégés' stages of teacher development, and how protégés' work environments impede or facilitate their efforts to improve their teaching.

Chart 2 — Core Principles of Mentoring

No matter where mentoring is taking place, however, we hold a core set of assumptions and principles about the mentoring process:

■ The growth and development of children, and of adults, in early childhood settings are vitally linked.

■ Like children, most adults learn best by having practical, job-related, hands-on opportunities to apply new ideas and information to real-life situations. The mentoring process provides a context for practicing and applying new skills, and for receiving guidance in teaching and caregiving practice.

■ The first years of teaching are an especially important time for learning and growing, but effective mentoring can occur at any stage of an educator's career.

■ Mentors should be directly experienced in the area(s) in which they are mentoring or coaching others.

■ In order to be most effective, a mentor should be trained as one. While a mentor should have considerable experience and skill in early care and education, including child development and pedagogy, she should also receive training and support in the areas of adult learning and teacher development.

■ Mentoring is not the same as supervision.

■ A mentor is also a learner, and needs support both as a teacher and as a learner.

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There is, of course, no *single* ingredient that leads to effective teaching. While mentoring is essential, we know that it cannot entirely substitute for strong teacher education, or for good work environments that provide adequate teaching support, encourage teacher growth, and offer professional levels of compensation.

But mentors are in a unique position, at the nexus of policy and practice, to serve not only as agents of change who help protégés improve their teaching practice and grow as professionals, but also as leaders and advocates who can contribute to broader improvements in adult work and learning environments in the field of early education. Mentors can help bring the voices of those who work daily with children into the discussion of how to improve services for

all young children, since children's well-being is directly linked to the well-being of their teachers.

Resource

Supporting Teachers as Learners: A Guide for Mentors and Coaches in Early Care and Education, by Marcy Whitebook and Dan Bellm, with Diana Schaack, includes chapters on theories of adult learning and adult development; how to form and build strong relationships between mentors and protégés; skills and strategies for effective mentoring; and mentors as leaders who can help promote better adult work environments in the early education field. Available from Redleaf Press, www.redleafpress.org/ Search.aspx?k=whitebook

End Notes

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Head Start Bureau, (2005); NAEYC & NACCRA, (2011); Zaslow, M., Tout, K., Halle, T., Whittaker, J., & Lavelle, B. (2010), Toward the identification of features of effective professional development for early childhood educators: Literature review, Washington, DC: Child Trends.

2 We credit this term to Ruby Takanishi, who used it in "The Unknown Teacher: Symbolic and Structural Issues in Teacher Education," her keynote address at the Midwest AEYC conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1980.

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