Chapter 1

The impact of mentoring on leadership capacity and professional learning

Kate Thornton

Introduction

Mentoring is an important strategy for supporting new and aspiring teachers, as well as experienced leaders. It is also an effective leadership approach that enhances professional learning and practice. This chapter will begin by considering definitions of mentoring and the differences and similarities between mentoring and coaching. Mentoring and coaching practices and the mentoring role of leaders from both within and outside of early childhood education (ECE) services will then be discussed.

I will be drawing on research from both the school and ECE sectors, and in particular my research over the last decade into approaches to leadership practice, leadership development, and leadership in professional learning communities. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the lack of support for leaders to develop their mentoring and coaching capacity, and suggestions for future professional learning. This discussion provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on how mentoring and coaching are enacted in their contexts.

Defining mentoring

Mentoring has been described as a relationship that involves supporting, motivating, shaping, guiding and encouraging, with the purpose of helping a mentee to reach their potential (Varney, 2012). While there is general agreement about these key mentoring strategies, there are different interpretations of the nature of mentoring relationships and the balance of influence within these relationships. Traditionally mentoring has referred to a more experienced person passing on their skills and knowledge to a less experienced person (Craft, 2000), but several authors advocate a less top-down, more collaborative relationship involving mutual learning (Asada, 2012; Bollinger, 2009).

The voluntary nature of mentoring relationships is also a source of debate. Traditionally, mentoring relationships are informal, and it is up to the mentee to select their own mentor. However, mentoring has increasingly become associated with formal preparation programmes, and mentors are assigned because of their expertise rather than being chosen because of their compatibility with mentees.

Mentoring or coaching?

There appears to be confusion between the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching', with some authors suggesting there is little difference (Brockbank & McGill, 2006; Pask & Joy, 2007), while others see them as quite distinct activities (Fletcher, 2012). There seems to be broad agreement that mentoring is a more holistic term that suggests an ongoing supportive relationship, whereas coaching involves more specific actions such as listening, questioning and goal setting (Fletcher, 2012). Coaching has been described as "the process used to help people reflect, find power and courage within themselves, and think and act in new ways in order to bring about positive change" (Wise & Jacobo, 2010, p. 163). Ives (2008) considers that the purpose of coaching is to help the person being coached "to focus on and achieve their clearly defined goals" (p. 103).

It has been suggested that coaching is an essential aspect of mentoring, along with relating, assessing and guiding (Rowley, 2006). Solansky (2010) sees the two roles as complementary and advocates for mentors to engage in coaching behaviours that increase the likelihood of leadership learning. The importance of coaches using "open-ended

questions to provide thought, raise awareness, and to inspire motivation and commitment" (Ives, 2008, p. 103) could also apply to mentors. Both concepts are relevant to teachers working in ECE services, whether they are in formal leadership roles or not.

There are different views on the specific expertise and skills required by mentors and coaches. Rodd (2013) suggests that mentors need to have specific knowledge and experience of the work of the mentee, while seeing coaches as taking a more specific time-bound role in helping individuals move forward, and so do not need specific expertise. However, Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley and Shepherd (2012) propose an alternative distinction, suggesting that coaches have specific expertise and focus on skill development, whereas mentoring is a process of sharing knowledge and skills and does not require technical expertise. A different perspective again is offered by Brockbank and McGill (2006), who have suggested that the most useful way of distinguishing between mentoring and coaching is by looking at the purpose and practices involved in each activity. In line with this idea, the purpose of each term was discussed above, and the practice will be explored in the following section.

Mentoring and coaching practices

Mentoring in the education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has typically focused on supporting beginning teachers by providing access to a mentor teacher, who enables them to gain full teacher registration. The term 'mentor teacher' was introduced with the release of the *Guidelines for Induction and Mentoring and Mentor Teachers* (New Zealand Teachers Council [NZTC], 2011). The change in terminology from the previous term 'tutor teacher' to 'mentor' in these guidelines signalled a shift in the way that beginning teachers are supported, with the focus being on educative mentoring, which involves support, provision of feedback and the facilitation of "evidence-informed reflective learning conversations" (NZTC, 2011, p. 10), rather than advice and guidance that may have limited benefits.

The benefits of induction and mentoring programmes are well established. Effective mentoring of beginning teachers within schools and ECE services has been shown to have a positive effect on the retention of teachers, the quality of teaching and learning, and the

achievement of students (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Pavia, Nissen, Hawkins, Monroe, & Filimon-Demeyen, 2003).

Mentoring is also employed in many leadership development programmes because it is viewed as an effective leadership development strategy. It is one of six approaches discussed by Day (2000), who argues that mentoring can be either formal or informal, and has the potential to support leadership development if it is aimed at growing leadership in the whole organisation rather than in individual leaders. The use of mentoring to support leadership development is also discussed by Solansky (2010), who suggests that a useful purpose of mentoring is for mentees to develop security in their leadership roles. Rhodes and Fletcher (2013) highlight mentoring as an effective leadership development approach that builds self-efficacy and has the potential to reduce the attrition rate of those in leadership positions. Ongoing mentoring for leaders in ECE is promoted by Waniganayake et al. (2012), who suggest that mentoring benefits both experienced and new leaders, because mentors can act as sounding boards and critical friends. Critical friends have been described as those who offer a different perspective on one's practice (Costa & Kallick, 1995). The inherent tension between the roles of critic and friend has been discussed, with the conclusion drawn that the concept is "more complex than the simple balance between the two potentially contrasting roles, as it is the combination of these roles that provides richness" (Thornton, 2009, p. 170).

Coaching has been referred to as a key tool in programmes focused on developing school leaders (Burley & Pomphrey, 2011). Such programmes involve goal setting to support the professional learning of individual leaders, with the purpose of achieving learning and personal growth (Blackman, 2010). Coaching not only supports the professional learning of those in leadership positions, but also encourages leadership in others. Fletcher (2012) has suggested that school leaders who have been coached are likely to go on to "identify and coach aspiring leaders in their institutions" (p. 36). A leader who uses coaching as a strategy is likely to be perceived as more collaborative than directive, and more of a listener and facilitator than a teller and decision maker (Bloom & Krovetz, 2009). Coaching leaders assist those they work with to "identify their unique strengths and weaknesses and tie them to their

personal and career aspirations" (Goleman, 2000, p. 87). They are less worried about short-term task completion than ongoing learning. This coaching approach to leadership is seen to have a positive impact on organisational climate and performance (Goleman, 2000).

Mentoring and coaching for leadership in early childhood education

Mentoring and coaching are both seen as important strategies for supporting leadership and professional learning in ECE settings. A study exploring the definitions and perceptions of leadership in the UK early years' sector (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013) identified leading others by mentoring and coaching as a common theme, along with being a role model and having a clear vision. Rodd (2013) has suggested that both mentoring and coaching are important leadership strategies for supporting the professional learning of both individuals and teams. She also likened the role of the mentor to that of a critical friend, and suggested that the relationship should be based on trust, honesty and mutual respect, and should also be supportive and non-judgemental. A recent study by Murphy and Butcher (2015) found that beginning teachers are more likely to develop confidence in their own leadership capacity if they have experienced positive mentoring relationships.

Mentoring and coaching have been promoted as strategies for both leadership development and effective leadership practice in the New Zealand ECE sector. I identified mentoring as an important leadership development strategy in a study exploring notions of leadership in the Centres of Innovation programme (Thornton, 2005). This research, which explored how leadership was defined and enacted in several of the first-round Centres of Innovation, identified a lack of support for leadership development in both teacher preparation and professional development programmes, and suggested strategies that would encourage the development of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership has been defined as leadership that is dispersed across group members and is characterised by interdependence and co-operation (Thornton, 2009). Mentoring approaches recommended in this study included developing relationships based on professionalism, mutual trust and respect. A study carried out by Clarkin-Phillips (2007) explored a particular model of professional development and identified coaching as

an aspect of professional development that supports distributed leadership, along with networking and collaboration. The results of this research included the finding that distributed leadership is "a significant factor in empowering teachers and affording them opportunities for ongoing learning and leadership" (p. 132).

More recently, I have been involved in research on professional learning communities in the ECE sector. Professional learning communities are groups of "professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults" (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12). Among the indicators of effective professional learning communities are shared and supported leadership and shared personal practice, including opportunities for mentoring and coaching. Professional learning communities are relevant to the New Zealand ECE sector because there is an expectation that all registered teachers will "contribute to the professional learning community" as an indicator of "showing leadership that contributes to effective teaching and learning" (NZTC, 2011, p. 11). A national survey revealed that "opportunities for coaching and mentoring were not as prevalent as some other aspects of shared personal practice and were mainly available for provisionally registered teachers" (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012, p. 57). This research also highlighted the importance of mentoring and coaching as leadership actions that "support the collective learning of all teachers" (p. 59). Subsequent research focused on the factors that contribute to effective professional learning communities, particularly organisational and structural factors (Cherrington & Thornton, 2015). This study involved case studies of different models of professional learning communities, and the role of the researchers/facilitators will be discussed later in the chapter.

In an article offering a vision of effective ECE leadership practice (Thornton, 2009), I suggested that relationships within and between services should include aspects of both mentoring and coaching. These relationships "may involve the professional leader mentoring less experienced teachers or they may take the form of critical friend relationships where teachers both support and challenge each other's practice" (p. 5). The lack of leadership development opportunities for those working in the New Zealand ECE sector was emphasised in this article, and there seems little evidence that anything has changed over the past 6 years.

Access to professional learning and/or tertiary qualifications for mentoring teachers was also highlighted in another New Zealand study focusing on the relationships and experiences of ECE student teachers working with their associates while on practicum (Murphy & Butcher, 2013).

Inside and outside mentoring roles

The mentoring and coaching roles taken by leaders, both within ECE services and from outside of ECE services, have been discussed in the literature. Waniganayake et al. (2012) have suggested that ECE leaders have a responsibility to mentor others in order to promote professional learning, leading to positive learning outcomes for children. Mentoring may take the form of modelling and encouraging "a culture of continual growth and professional responsibility" (Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 100). Those who mentor or coach others can benefit just as much from the relationship as those they mentor or coach, and leaders who engage in mentoring may be encouraged to reflect on their own practice. Rodd (2013) has discussed the benefits for mentors from an ECE perspective, including the development of insight and new understanding, the enhancement of professional competence, and increased self-awareness and reflection.

The importance of trusted professionals from outside ECE services providing mentoring and coaching has been discussed in New Zealand research. My study, involving three of the first-round Centres of Innovation, identified several mentoring roles. One of these was the role taken by the programme co-ordinator, Dr Anne Meade, who provided support and encouragement to the Centres of Innovation. Also, one of the services in this study mentored a nearby service; the relationship between these services was described as collegial and ongoing (Feltham, 2004). It was not so much a relationship of dependence as one that was characterised by "trust and reciprocity" (Feltham, 2004, p.1), and involved mutual learning. Both these roles had positive impacts on the effectiveness of the programme and the sector as a whole (Thornton, 2005).

I coined the term 'trusted inquisitor' for the role I took as an action learning facilitator in my doctoral research into blended action learning for leadership learning in ECE (Thornton, 2009). As the researcher/

facilitator, I worked with small groups of leaders over a period of 6 to 8 months to support their leadership learning, both in face-to-face sessions and through online interactions—hence the term 'blended learning'. Action learning involves a questioning and reflective listening process in response to a problem or issue, and in the context of a small group of learners. This role involved coaching in the practice of "forming and encouraging trusting relationships characterised by empathy and support; and also questioning and challenging participants to encourage reflective practice and leadership learning" (Thornton, 2009, p. 169). This coaching role also involved providing participants with options for how they might proceed in their leadership journeys. As a result of being coached, participants in this study began to use coaching strategies with their teaching teams and several commented on how empowering their teachers found this approach.

The recent research exploring the relevance of professional learning communities to the New Zealand ECE sector (referred to earlier) discusses the roles taken by the facilitators/researchers and their similarity to critical friends. These roles involved facilitating face-to-face meetings and responding to the online postings of the study participants. Among the elements of the role commented on by the participants were the provision of resources, non-judgemental listening, and questioning to encourage reflection (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014), actions similar to those taken by mentors or coaches. In the more effectively functioning professional learning communities in this study, where there was a high level of relational trust and the participants were willing to be challenged, "deeper level questioning encouraged reflection and led to shifts in practice" (p. 101).

All the mentoring and coaching relationships described above promote professional learning and encourage leadership in different ways. Although leaders who coach and mentor teachers within their service provide support, someone from outside the service is able to provide a different perspective on service practice and/or leadership and can encourage critical reflection. The importance of outside facilitation to effective professional learning has been emphasised in a review of continuing professional development in the New Zealand ECE sector (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013). This outsider role was discussed in Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) best evidence synthesis on professional

development in early childhood settings, which concluded that expert facilitators have an important role in challenging practice and providing alternative perspectives. The value of a trusted but impartial person from outside the service supporting a mentoring relationship was promoted by Pavia et al. (2003). These authors suggested that such third parties have the potential to contribute to the effectiveness of the relationship "by assessing the ongoing needs of both and collaborating with mentors to devise strategies for more effective interactions" (p. 259).

Future mentoring/coaching practice in the New Zealand ECE sector

The provision of support for leadership development programmes involving elements of mentoring and coaching in the New Zealand school sector contrasts with the lack of support for leadership development in the ECE sector and the lack of opportunities for those in leadership roles to develop their mentoring and coaching skills. First-time principals in Ministry of Education-funded programmes are assigned a mentor for the course of their 1-year programme, and aspiring principals involved in the National Aspiring Principals programme (also nationally funded) receive coaching. There are no equivalent Ministry of Education-funded programmes to support leadership development in the ECE sector, with the only financial support available for more generic professional development. There is clear evidence in the research literature that mentoring and coaching are important strategies for supporting beginning teachers (Murphy & Butcher, 2013), for aspiring leaders (Waniganayake et al., 2012), and for building and sustaining professional learning communities (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). There are, however, very few opportunities for professional leaders to develop the necessary skills, or to learn about and reflect on their role as mentors and coaches.

The model of professional learning communities offers a useful framework for reflecting on the way shared and supportive leadership, collective learning, shared personal practice and supportive relationships are enacted in ECE services. Professional leaders wanting to develop collaborative leadership practices and to distribute leadership across the teaching team need to focus on effective mentoring and coaching strategies. These include listening, giving non-judgemental

feedback, effective questioning, and goal setting, and their effective implementation requires specific and ongoing opportunities for professional learning.

Becoming an effective mentor requires specialist preparation and support (Patterson & Thornton, 2014). Such opportunities should be a priority for the Ministry of Education to ensure that not only are ECE teachers able to demonstrate professional leadership and participate in professional learning communities, as required in the Registered Teacher Criteria (NZTC, 2011), but can also contribute to a stronger, critically reflective ECE sector (Cherrington & Thornton, 2015).

Conclusion

Effective ECE leaders mentor and coach their colleagues and encourage them to become involved in leadership. This approach supports the development of professional learning communities, characterised by shared and supportive leadership, collective learning, shared personal practice and supportive relationships. Mentoring and coaching both require complex skills, but there are very few opportunities for leaders or teachers in the New Zealand ECE sector to develop these skills. The provision of professional learning programmes for leaders in the sector that include aspects of mentoring and coaching would provide support for effective leadership practice and for participating in professional learning communities. This provision is long overdue and should be a priority for the sector.

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