



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Mentoring Educators Helping Educators

“Who finds a mentor, finds a treasure.”

~ S. L. Kapur, 1997

Indian Express Newspapers Ltd: Bombay

THE NATURE OF MENTORING

Mentor programs in education are found at all levels of the American system from preschool to graduate studies. Mentors are active in many schools both within and across the boundaries of populations of the school culture, including students, student teachers, new and experienced teachers, new to the school building teachers, teaching assistants, new and experienced administrators, state education agencies, university faculty, and community members.

The numerous scenarios for mentoring strengthen the assumption that the role of a mentor in an educational setting is dependent on the context and purpose for mentoring. There is no exact formula for an effective mentor or mentor program. An effective mentor creatively paints from a palette of skills that may be as unique as the personalities of the two persons paired in the mentor relationship.

In practicality, the mentorship is a dynamic association and its effectiveness is limited by the quality of the relationship. No matter what the specific objectives may be of a mentor program, the overarching goal of mentoring is to elevate the professionalism of the protégé through a mutually satisfying relationship.

Einstein revealed his understanding of the mentor relationship as an interpersonal art. He acknowledged the challenge of the mentor, to not merely clone oneself, but to nurture the protégé to blossom in his uniqueness.

It is the supreme art of the mentor to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.

~ attributed to Albert Einstein

STAFF DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Staff development was once seen as separate from the on-going, day-to-day work of educators; as a series of unrelated workshops and presentations with little guidance for implementation or follow-up. Today, the best professional development practices are seen as deeply embedded in the daily work of educators' reflective practice, continuous dialogue and collaborative work—all a part of the mentoring process. When valuable learning is facilitated in a collegial context rather than isolated from the school and classroom context, it transfers into classroom practice (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Guskey extends upon this collegial view in his proposal that professional development should be systemic, ongoing, and intentional, occurring through a unique combination of the seven major models: “training, observation/assessment, involvement in the development-improvement process, study groups, inquiry/action research, individually guided activities, and mentoring” (2000, p 16).

ROLES OF STAFF DEVELOPERS

According to Killion and Harrison (1997), the role of staff developer has evolved from the 1970's when staff developers primarily delivered workshops to a broader role based on the “new century” thinking that has a comprehensive, systemic focus on the learning organization and learning community. Throughout the past three decades, staff developers have added new responsibilities to their roles that reflect the changes in our education system (e.g., centralized decision making to decentralized decision making; bureaucratic to more organic organizations).

It is widely recognized that systemic thinking and shared roles have the potential to promote growth in the organization and foster learning communities. With this systemic focus, it has become routine practice for most staff developers to assume multiple roles, the eight major roles cited by Killion and Harrison (1997) being the following:

- Staff Development Trainer/Designer
- Coach/Mentor
- Resource Provider
- Program Manager
- Consultant
- Task Facilitator
- Process Facilitator
- Catalyst for Change

These roles are usually shared both laterally and vertically among members of a school system. Skills and activities among the roles overlap with each role having unique challenges related to collaboration with clients and other staff developers.

MENTOR COMPETENCIES

Denmark and Podsen (2000) have further delineated the mentoring role by examining competencies, clustering these mentoring skills into seven categories:

1. Understanding the mentoring role
2. Initiating the relationship
3. Establishing a climate of peer support
4. Modeling reflective teaching practices
5. Applying and sharing effective classroom management strategies
6. Encouraging and nurturing an appreciation of diversity
7. Embracing mentoring as an investment in professional development

CREATING A MENTOR PROGRAM

Staff development plays an essential role in establishing a mentor program for teachers. Formal mentoring programs require a plan to teach the prerequisite knowledge, develop necessary skills, and establish a support group for mentors.

Additionally, Janas (1996) cited four major tasks identified by Ganser, Freiberg, and Zbikowski, which the staff developer must manage and consider when developing a mentoring program. Janas summarized these tasks as follows:

Selecting and training individuals to serve as mentors — a critical element in establishing a mentor program. Mentors should have expert knowledge related to the content or focus of the mentoring program, be committed to the success of their protégé, and have the available time to provide assistance. The immediate environment of the protégé is a primary location for identifying prospective mentors because proximity may increase access for formal and informal meetings. Selection of mentors can be guided by interviews, observations, recommendations, and questionnaires, which may be useful and cost effective to learn more about potential mentors (Janus, 1996). There are no rigid rules about the characteristics of effective mentors, but Janus found research that indicated these attributes:

- willingness to nurture another person
- people-oriented, open-minded, flexible, and empathetic
- receptive, responsive, open, and dependable
- collaborative and cooperative.

Janus also reported in his 1996 survey of research on mentor training that successful mentoring behaviors can be taught and learned when done in an on-going manner. Skills that were often included in mentor training included:

- communication/active listening techniques
- relationship skills
- effective teaching practices
- models of supervision and coaching
- conflict resolution
- problem solving.

It is important to remember for staff development purposes that there may be a continuum of mentoring activities; some roles and programs may require more extensive in-service than others. Mentors may provide support ranging from occasional coaching to long-term, intense commitments.

Matching mentors with protégés — important because the relationship is the heart of the process. Proximity and similarity of assignments have traditionally been top considerations in matching mentors with protégés. Convenience does not ensure success. Far more important are the personalities of the two educators and the willingness of the mentor to work with the specific protégé. Other considerations may be the willingness of the mentor and protégé to work across gender, ethnic, racial, cultural, or class backgrounds. For some people this could be a hindrance in developing trust and a close relationship. The key question may be, “*Are these two professionals suited in personal characteristics to work together in a demanding relationship?*” (Janus, 1996, p. 3).

Setting Goals and Expectations — important because there are so many types of programs lending the role of mentor a variety of meanings. Staff developers should work with mentors and protégés from the outset to plan and set goals so that there is a shared expectation of the results. Staff developers also need to make transparent their own process of goal attainment to their protégé mentors. This process can serve as a model to mentors in establishing goals with their protégés. The staff developer will need to oversee the learning process and with the mentors discuss progress along the continuum of goals. Ten distinct stages of mentoring that were identified by Mendler in 1994, and summarized by Janus (1996) are as follows:

1. Attraction
2. Cliché exchange
3. Recounting
4. Personal disclosure
5. Bonding
6. Fear of infringement – *The staff developer remains alert to signs of emerging problems in the relationship because this is when they are most likely to happen.” Staff developers may be asked to intervene with conflict resolution and negotiate between the mentor and protégé to move the pair to the next level.*
7. Revisiting framework – *When the mentor and protégé revisit the process and reaffirm their intentions, they can move into the most productive stages.*

8. Peak mentoring – *The staff developer may need to give guidance, which may be less intense and more comfortable due to shared experiences.*
9. Reciprocity
10. Closure

Establishing the Mentor Program requires significant skills on the part of the staff developer. Janus found that, “...staff developers must master counseling, mediation and negotiation, intervention, and supervisory skills” (1996, p. 4). Personal sensitivity was noted as a characteristic essential to sharing these expert skills. In addition to these relational skills, the staff developer must be able to organize physical arrangements, deal with logistics, and plan for monitoring and supervising mentors. Planning for formal and informal one-on-one meetings, scheduling group meetings, determining key content and time frames for meetings may keep the lines of communication open and reduce the isolation of mentors. A plan for monitoring mentor progress may include creating checkpoints between formal meetings, such as informal meetings, phone calls and e-mail.

BENEFITS OF MENTORING

Mentoring can be a professional life-changing activity for both protégé and mentor with both direct and indirect benefits. It is intentional thoughtful planning that ensures many positive outcomes for participants. Janus (1996) summarized the benefits of mentoring found in a survey of educational literature as:

- the development of a personal work ethic and standard (Kaufmann, 1986).
- increased career aspirations; greater personal interest and expression of talents (Bloom, 1998; Gray, 1984).
- enhanced ability to work toward a vision (Sullivan, 1992).
- increased creativity (Milan & Schwartz, 1992; Torrance, 1984).

Mentoring can go beyond the classroom, school, or district to encourage social change and quality education for all (White-Hood, 1993).

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