Principals' Perceptions about Their Role as Mentors

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WE RISE BY LIFTING OTHERS
Purpose

Research investigating mentoring in education mostly focus on its benefits for the mentees (Thornton, 2014). The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of secondary school mentor principals about the benefits of mentoring relationships for them.
Context

- The **Master of Secondary School Leadership (MSSL)** programme has a shadowing/mentoring component.

- An advisory board provided the names of acknowledged effective principals.

- Students are mentored by and shadow an experienced principal for one week each trimester over the two year programme.

- Both the host principals and the students were given information to guide the placement.

- A debriefing meeting is held at the end of each day.

- Participants in this study are volunteers from the host principals.
Major challenges currently facing New Zealand secondary school principals

- Workload a week (Wylie, 2015)
- Lack of leadership preparation (Macpherson, 2009)
- Developing technologies and diverse student populations (OECD, 2009)
- Pressures of a performative environment (Codd, 2005)
- Isolation prevents principals from being exposed to new ideas.
- The relentless pace of their jobs inhibits the ability of principals to use reflective practice to assist them in becoming more expert problem solvers (Barnett 2001)
- The competitive environment hinders open professional discourse (participant)
"I could use a mentor. But what I really need is a nap."
Mentoring as an effective educational leadership strategy

- Suggested as one of four pillar practices (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStephano, 2013).

- Of three different leadership profiles: people-minded, moderate-minded and administrative minded, the people-minded principal, was most effective (Devos & Bouckenhooge, 2009).

- Suggested criteria for educational or learner-centred leadership include supporting the learning and development of colleagues through coaching and modelling and supporting collaborative strategies (West-Burnham, 2013, p. 24).
Mentoring as an approach to supporting leadership development


- Promoted as an effective leadership development approach that builds self-efficacy and has the potential to reduce principal attrition (Rhodes, 2013).
Shadowing

- Shadowing is an on-the-job learning, career development, and leadership development intervention. It involves the learner staying close and unobtrusive (like a shadow), over a period of time to find out about the job (O’Mahony & Matthews, 2003).
Shadowing can generate powerful learning if:

- the observer reflects
- asks questions that explore what has been observed

It can then clarify for the observer the nature of the job and the skills and knowledge needed to do it (O’Mahony & Matthews, 2003). As such shadowing can generate powerful learning (West-Burnham & O’Sullivan, 1998).
Cognitive apprenticeship
(Dennen & Burner 2007)

- A process by which learners learn from an experienced person by way of cognitive and metacognitive skills and processes. Through cognitive apprenticeship tacit processes are made visible to the learners. In this model the experienced leader models and demonstrates the thinking processes, coaches or mentors the learner, the learner reflects and assesses, articulates their reflection and explores the outcome (p.426).
Debriefing meeting

- Through ‘reflection on action’ (Schon, 1983) principals shared the thinking that underpinned their tacit knowledge and critical judgement.
Research Model

- A single embedded case study (Yin, 2009):
The phenomenon of interest is the mentoring roles of school principals, and the units of analysis are the individual cases of ten effective school principals.
Participants

- Ten secondary school principals
  - Four female / Six male
- Purposive sampling
  - The principals recommended by Advisory Board of the MSSL and who had hosted a student were invited to participate.
Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews
- October 2014 – May 2015
- Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.
Questions focussed on:

- The MSSL experience
- Personal experiences of being mentored
- Access to effective mentoring
- Mentoring roles within their school
Data Analysis

- The data was analyzed holistically employing Creswell's (2007) data analysis stages:
  - preparing and organizing the data
  - categorizing data into themes
  - representing the data.
Accepting an aspiring principal to host has been important for as it is a way of giving back to the society. As he likes seeing his students develop, similarly he likes to see the educators to develop and contribute to the cycle.
Reciprocity

- Massive plus
- I would like to do it once a year
- We learned heaps
- The best professional learning
- I think every time you talk to someone even if they are seeking your advice, you get something out of that. It is actually a human quality to feel good about sharing ideas and things. I think we got much out of it with the student.
Stimulated critical reflection

He asked me why – that really made me reflect

You don't usually think why am I doing it like this. Is there a better way?

All of a sudden you had to think about what you were doing. And having been a principal for quite a while you just get on and do it, and then having to think why did you say this in a conversation or why did you take this approach probably several times a day you sit down and he would ask me questions and I would have to think did I say that - you would have to self reflect which is quite interesting because you don't do that very often.
Independent eyes and ears

I told him/her things I wouldn't normally tell anyone

You are not trying to sell yourself. They see you walking around being yourself. That makes it a genuine rapport – showing vulnerability being comfortable with it
A new lens

It was like having your granny to visit

You catch the culture of your school – you see through new lens
Connectivity

I am always keen for people to see our strengths

We discussed values

We need to consider all students, not just our own

I think it is valuable because we need to be more connected and we need to know what is happening in other schools and it is very important for people at that stage of their career. It is a process chance to look at another school in contrast to the school that you act.

The senior management team also benefitted
Personal experience of mentoring

- Ranged from extensive to little – identified a gap
- All have extensive networks but few provide challenges
- The competitive model and different philosophies affect trust.
Experiences of being mentored

- All had many fellow principals they could approach – tended to be for ‘just in time’ tips.

- Range of experiences as first time principals

- Recognised the need for challenge
Mentoring roles within the school

- One has established coaching in PLD – moving from convivial to collegial
- Pockets of mentoring in the schools – PRTS, student teachers.
- Appraisal meetings, line manager meetings take place but recognised a gap.
- Staff encouraged informally, through work experience or through financial support.

I feel strongly that I have an obligation to help other people in their career
Benefits of the shadowing/mentoring

- Forced them to examine critically their core educational values and actions as school leaders
- Built their capacity as reflective practitioners
- Enhanced their ability to examine issues holistically and become more proactive leaders
- Affirmed what they were doing well as school leaders, as well as revealing areas of growth.
New Knowledge

Relating

Listening

Questioning

Reflecting
Reflection in action and on action generate new knowledge.

The sorts of knowledge we reveal in our intelligent action are publically observable but tacit. Sometimes it is possible to make a description of the tacit knowledge implicit in them and explore the theories underpinning the action

Schon, 1983
Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2009)

The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action

I used to think......now I think.......  
- Individual experience: aha moments  
- Need a catalyst: what, how, why, questioning  
- Critical reflection: critical scrutiny of the presupposition underlying what we believed was true
Implications

- Importance of shared critical reflection – conviviality more common than critique/feedback
- The benefit of independent eyes and ears
- Lack of opportunities to learn about mentoring practice
- Career support for teachers not formalised
- Unique view, holistic
References