Peer-reviewed paper

Hierarchy to heterarchy, shifting the power imbalance in the mentoring relationship

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This article explores mentoring concepts that have stemmed from an organisation's long term self-review of mentoring practice. It challenges the contemporary hierarchical, positional leader approach to mentoring and suggests that the power in the mentoring relationship needs to shift to a consultative and collaborative heterarchy leadership style.

Introduction

This article reports upon a mentoring self-review led by early childhood professional leaders working within the Central Kids Kindergarten Trust (Central Kids)[1]. It challenges the contemporary hierarchical, positional leader approach to mentoring and suggests that the power in the mentoring relationship needs to shift to a consultative and collaborative heterarchy leadership style. This commentary offers a reflective position from a four year mentoring self-review that challenged the notion that the leaders in early childhood settings should take responsibility for the pivotal role of mentoring support for mentees to professionally develop.

Early findings for the review invited a shift in practice to resist mentor relationships that arose from a basis of power from a hierarchical positional, knowledge and title, but rather sought mentors by relevant funds of knowledge, relationship skills and intrapersonal dispositions. In this article we will report on our shifts in practice emerging from our new belief that those with high levels of self-awareness and self-efficacy are more suited to mentoring roles that have the capacity to grow teacher professional learning and in turn leadership.

Shaping knowledge through self-review

Analysis of data gathered during a Central Kids teacher registration self-review in 2009 challenged the effectiveness of our organisation's teacher registration mentoring programme. The findings indicated the need to develop a more robust programme as some teachers claimed that they had received unsuccessful guidance from their mentors (Brouwer, Pierce, Treweek & Wallace, 2015). In 2013 a review group consisting solely of professional leaders was established to critique Central Kids current mentoring programme.

[1] Central Kids is responsible for 57 sites spread over a large geographical area within Aotearoa/New Zealand offering a range of early education services for children from six months to six years of age.

The review group identified the need to grow their knowledge on best practice for mentoring and sought apposite professional learning and development (PLD) opportunities. New learning generated a range of questions about our current mentoring programme. Arguably, the existing programme fostered a disconnection between Central Kids' espoused theory of facilitating inclusiveness, and our teachers' reality in practice. One review group member also highlighted a concern regarding power within the mentoring relationship and led reflections into the notion of who actually holds the power? This challenge provoked the review team to open up our process for deeper collaboration and consultation within our review. A restructuring of the self-review group was initiated to ensure we provided a forum for teacher voice as we realised we had not authentically honoured this to date.

Teacher voices

Data was collected and interpreted using a thematic analysis framework, which allowed emergent themes to be developed. In the early stages of the self-review, all recently appointed teachers and leaders were invited to participate in a survey about the current mentoring and induction programme. Of the 20 who were invited to participate, 14 responded in writing to the questions posed around the topic including sharing their ideas for a successful mentoring programme. Some responses included:

> *"Pairing up with teachers in similar positions in other centres"*
>
> *"It would be better to have a mentor out of my own centre for neutral advice, and to be able to go around to other Kindergartens"*

Other narratives were gathered from participants within the review team:

> *"A comprehensive mentoring programme should not be the responsibility of one teacher acting in isolation but in employers, leaders, and early childhood education (ECE) professional learning community and the wider profession to be engaged"*
>
> *"A mentor should be chosen who is able to work comfortably and supportively in a co-constructive relationship with the mentee"*

The analysis of our current situation lead us to phase two and the current review question:

How can we ensure a robust framework that reflects the multifaceted nature of mentoring?

Moving from hierarchy to heterarchy

In 2015 the review group were ready to reframe the current hierarchical framework for mentoring by opening up mentoring relationships to enable choice and flexibility. There was readiness to contest our mind-set about leadership roles and move towards a deeper philosophical understanding of the importance found within authentic relationships. As part of the self-review process we paused to explore and deepen our understandings of the value of establishing and maintaining relationships through connections, and reciprocal ongoing dialogue. Research insisted that these were essential components of successful leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Robertson, 2005; Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck & Avolio, 2010). By taking a step back, our reflections and intuition told us that we had been too focussed on the systems of mentoring and had lost sight of the human element.

Kedian (2016, personal communication) reminds of the dangers of focusing on the urgent tasks and leaving the important unexplored, which could lead to the process of our reflections being ignored. Our organisational professional learning and development moved towards highlighting the value of relationships and providing specific tools to support both mentors and mentees. Through participation in targeted PLD we found that specific questioning techniques, such as those used in motivational interviewing (Margaret Ross, consultant, 2016, personal communication) and Open to Learning Conversations (Watson, 2015) were tools that promoted a pathway to building stronger reflective practice, relationships and connections for those within the mentoring relationship.

Professional learning and development within our review had indicated that a heterarchical leadership model was in keeping with current theory. This required a shift in organisational structure, from a hierarchical model to a more consultative and collaborative heterarchical approach (Gronn, 2008). Heterarchy is described by Gronn (2008) as a new hybrid of leadership that demonstrates a merging of hierarchical and heterarchical modes of ordering responsibilities.

Flexible mentoring

Pierce's (2014) dissertation introduced the notion of sharing leadership and flexible mentoring by using a heterarchical model. A participant of Pierce's research claimed the value of "getting people involved". She reinforced this by stating "I don't have to do everything myself". Another participant echoed this idea with her comments, "shared leadership allows others to take leadership roles in areas they are passionate about or where they exhibit expertise" (Pierce, 2014). With a range of case studies being successfully documented we coined the phrase 'flexible mentoring' and made an organisational commitment to honouring choice and flexibility within the mentoring relationship.

Different mentoring opportunities were opened up for teachers and leaders within our organisation. Our recently adopted commitment to a heterarchical model, provided opportunities to gather case studies of flexible mentoring. An example of our approach to flexible mentoring included provisionally registered teachers being encouraged to seek mentors that fit with their individual way of knowing, being and doing. Traditionally within our organisation this role would have been the responsibility of someone with a formal leadership role, and while sometimes this may the best option, our new learning has highlighted the value of providing choice for both mentor and mentee. Research by Kram and Higgins highlights the importance of a range or "constellation of learning relationships for people working in organisations" (as cited in Hunt, 2005, p. 9).

Indicators of a successful mentor

The self-review group explored many topics, including understanding of differences between coaching and mentoring. The surprising result of this review was that we found consistencies in opinion began to emerge around what dispositions are necessary to be a successful mentor and coach. By 2014 the review team had drafted a list of 'indicators of a successful mentor' which we referred to as "ways of knowing and ways of being" outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Indicators of a successful mentor

Ways of knowing	Ways of being
Reciprocity	• Learning from each other—ako • Belief in mentees • Offering and receiving feedback • Establish agreed ways of working together • Sharing ideas • Encouraging ongoing dialogue • Co-creator of new knowledge and understanding
Proactivity	• People coming up with their own ideas through reflective questioning • Building a learning community • Seeking to understand
Self-efficacy	• Understanding self • Being reflective
Trustworthiness	• Reliability • Authenticity
Inspirational	• Exemplary practitioner • Affirming • Motivating • Encouraging others to challenge themselves • Challenging • Modelling
Ethical	• Observing what is seen without judgement • Value diversity • Professional • Confidential
Engaged listener	• Being present • Positive growth mind set • Being open minded • Listening more than talking • Listening for the message
Mentee centred	• Encouraging risk taking in learning • Developing critical thinking • Committing to the learning journey
Respectful	• Encouraging uniqueness • Non-judgmental

Self-awareness

Two characteristics that emerged from this list were the need for ‘understanding self’ and ‘being reflective’, which we initially connected together as a ‘way of being’, entitled ‘self-awareness’. There is literature surrounding self-awareness that supports the importance of developing this characteristic (Rhodes, Stokes & Hampton, 2004, as cited in Morrison & Ferrier Kerr, 2015). Rodd (2013) adds to this by stating “mentoring is a strategy that promotes self-awareness and self-assessment in a collaborative and non-threatening atmosphere” (p. 175). To have knowledge of self, what motivates, inspires and influences practice enables practitioners to reflect, and thus inform intentional change and development.

Furthermore, taking time to understand self within the learning process assists mentoring because an ability to understand oneself, may have the promise of understanding how to grow potential in others. However, in

conjunction with growing potential in others, mentors have the responsibility to understand the social and cultural influences on learning. Māori philosophies of education for example stem from ancient beliefs and collective aspirations, as opposed to an individual pursuit. Your abilities are a gift that originates from your ancestors and hark back to the beginning of time.

Ross (2016) and Watson (2015) were influential in supporting our knowledge around the importance of embedding reflective practice as a way of deepening self-awareness. Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) state that to achieve self-awareness "individuals must come to an understanding of their own behaviour; they must develop a conscious awareness of their own actions and effects, and the ideas or theories-in-use that shape action strategies" (as cited in Morrison & Ferrier-Kerr, 2015, p. 270). Building on this idea, Thompson and Thompson (2008) remind us of the important place reflection has in knowing self and understanding how we can influence outcomes for others. This is an important concept for the mentor to consider for themselves but equally important is the mentor's ability to ascertain where the mentee is on the reflective pathway in order to open meaningful dialogue (Rouse, 2015). We asked ourselves is it enough to be self-aware without action and decided it was not? Therefore, we tasked ourselves to look for a deeper understanding of self-awareness which led to exploring the notion of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy predicts achievement and performance. For example "perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels" (Schunk & Pajares, 2009, p. 35). The interesting point here is that it is perception rather than the actual outcome that measures an individual's self-efficacy. A high sense of self-efficacy does not compensate for a lack of ability – practice is necessary to become skilled and knowledgeable which can lead to success.

How can self-efficacy in mentoring be explained? In early childhood there is an expectation that teachers will mentor their colleagues (Rodd, 2013). Our mentoring research purported the need for both mentor and mentee to have a range of strategies that draws them into critically reflective practice to build self-efficacy.

Bandura (1994) goes on to classify self-efficacy into four interwoven domains of influence. Performance attainment is an effective way of creating a strong sense of self-efficacy. The most influential aspect of this domain is the skill to describe an outcome that indicates success which is attainable yet sets a challenge. It is important to recognise one's own mastery experiences and have the opportunity to repeat these to understand how they have affected your level of performance. Some considerations when setting a goal are difficulty of the chosen task, amount of effort expended in achieving the task, amount of intrinsic motivation, the circumstances and the timing or pattern of repeated successes.

The second way of promoting self-efficacy is through vicarious experiences which include gaining meaningful feedback from others and observing people similar to one's self being successful in a similar situation. "Competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies" (Bandura, p. 3, 1994). In our self-review, the teachers we interviewed informed us that they would prefer mentors who were inspiring and role modelled relevant practice. The measurement of one's success against another with similar abilities who demonstrates goal accomplishment raises beliefs in one's own efficacy (Bandura, 1994).

Thirdly, verbal persuasion or encouragement from others that focuses on the persons own goals and efforts towards attaining mastery leads to consolidation of self-efficacy. Dweck (2012) cautions the use of praise that focuses on positive labels as her research indicates this can be de-motivating. Instead the use of encouragement that highlights effort inspires a growth mind-set. The effectiveness of this persuasion depends on the relationship, topic knowledge and credibility of the person offering it. This idea is supported by Rodd (2013) who describes the mentor as a "critical friend" characterised by the attributes of trust and respect.

In the final point, Bandura (1994) lists physiological states as a domain that draws attention to the person's own emotional condition. A positive mood enhances performance and attitude whereas, low mood decreases them. An attitude of inner-belief in one's performance is more likely to meet with a successful outcome when our wellbeing is enhanced due to one's level of self-awareness. This is linked to emotional intelligence which correlates to the hallmarks of effective mentoring and leadership. Fiedeldey-Van Dijk and Freedham (2007) support the idea that leadership improves when emotional intelligence is developed.

The goal of teachers understanding their own personal learning success strategies is valuable for their personal educational advancement. However, consideration should be given within the mentor relationship to the notion of collective efficacy and the understanding that indigenous world views are predominantly shaped within community need and aspiration. Hook, Waaka and Parehaereone Raumati (2007) describe cultural influences on mentoring as a learning journey that is broader than the self. They assert that "the enhancement of the individual may be subsumed to the purposes of the group. Upward mobility for an individual Māori will result in a perception of upward mobility for the group, be it whānau, hapū, or iwi" (p. 5).

Social Justice

The review group has a strong commitment to take heed of social justice, which is supported by the Central Kids' philosophy and vision. Feedback received during the original and subsequent self-reviews uncovered minimal alignment between our commitment to social justice and some of the practices within our organisation. The mentor - mentee relationships were not always successful due to power inequity and teacher voices were not apparent in our early review processes. The positioning of power reappeared as we considered that teachers in education are charged with critically examining their own beliefs and how they impact on their professional practice. Unwittingly Central Kids had shaped teacher practice based on the dominant cultural frames of yesteryear, and as our review group grappled with attempts to indigenise our programmes several alarm bells were starting to ring. Mikaere (2011) cautions that "the connection between racism and assimilation is inescapable; in seeking to recreate us in their own image, our colonisers have been practising yet another form of genocide" (p. 72).

The flexible mentoring that was explored was built on the premise of aligning mentors and mentees to shared knowledge pathways and aspirations. For our Māori teachers finding suitable mentors that had the relevant cultural knowledge was rare due to the majority of teachers belonging to the dominant culture in New Zealand. Privileging of knowledge within a dominant cultural discourse was a concomitant result of our population and education policies. Review findings were indicating that mentors applied mentorship that resulted in a replica of themselves (we referred to as 'mini me'). Our concerns began to percolate and eventually we questioned ourselves as to whose knowledge is valued most by Central Kids?

The 'mini me' mentoring strategy that we had been trying to reframe would possibly be most evident within intercultural relationships if the foundations of effective mentoring were not applied. Rodd (2013) offers one valuable point by claiming that "Mentoring is not about controlling or foisting one's ideas, values and behaviours on another but rather encouraging mentees to explore possibilities" (p.174).

A caution is necessary to ensure that the function of mentoring is an open minded discovery of each person's beliefs. Mentors must be mindful of not laying their set of values over the mentee and instead encourage the mentee to embark on a journey of learning about self and how this feeds the collective. This relationship must hold sacrosanct the cornerstones of social justice so as not to perpetuate injustices in our society by silencing the sacredness of voice.

Rodd (2013) coined the term faulty logic with regard to a concern that mentors can make decisions without robust analysis, and therefore allow filters like emotional issues to cloud judgement (p. 133). Those within the mentoring relationship therefore need to have a strong understanding of how they influence the outcomes for

others. This has implications for all those involved in the overseeing of mentoring partnerships and the development of efficient mentoring frameworks.

The development of the self-review into a flexible mentoring framework is ongoing and ever evolving. The authors believe to date that our review is beginning to validate self-awareness and self-efficacy as critical tools for all involved in a mentoring relationship. Social justice is an area that our review team has agreed is pivotal for a successful mentoring relationship. Early indications suggest that this would be a valuable next step to mitigate embryonic concerns on the notion of power, which has been a reoccurring construct throughout our review journey.

Conclusion

This article is a reflective commentary of our self-review findings to date on mentoring in early childhood education. Our journey continues to move forward in search of developing an authentic and meaningful mentoring framework, which gives equal status to all stakeholders in the mentoring relationship. The findings are directing our compass towards a flexible mentoring framework that highlights choices for mentor and mentee relationships that are born in the basket of shared knowledge.

It is the authors' belief, self-awareness and self-efficacy with its implications for social justice have a significant impact on the success of a mentoring relationship. Through the process of deep reflection and the development of a socially just filtering system, we are endeavouring to seek to understand the injustices that form a constant barrier to equitable educational opportunities in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The authors are aware that some teachers find value in building a constellation of learning relationships around themselves to grow professionally. Therefore, the authors believe the traditional method of limiting choice for the mentoring partner/s may minimise the potential for growth. Lastly and significantly this self-review claims that formal leadership titles are not a prerequisite to be a successful mentor. As we let go of the traditional concept of leadership and a hierarchical model of mentoring, we are opening a door that honours the voices from within our self-review, enables choice and flexibility and moves us closer to a heterarchical approach of mentoring.

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