

Mentorship as a professional learning approach



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Since the introduction of the National Quality Standard in 2011, early childhood educators have sought support to implement what they consider to be a very complex set of measures. Coupled with their lack of experience, one of the main challenges with implementing the standards is the growing divide between theory and practice, especially given that many educators undertook their training well over 20 years ago.

Fortunately, and in a bold and un-precedented move by the government, funds totalling \$200 million have recently been made available to services in Australia as part of the Long Day Care Professional Development Programme (LDCPDP). Designed to identify gaps in the professional learning of educators, increase the level of capacity to deliver high-quality programs for children, develop support for educators in remote areas, support continuous educator improvement, and facilitate professional conversations, the LDCPDP is certainly a positive strategy in bridging the professional learning gap. Given the intense pressures to respond to the demands of newly adopted quality standards, financial support enabling services to deliver quality education has been long overdue.

While the LDCPDP has been well received in the sector, how funds are used is very much left to the discretion of the service provider. While many service providers have a sound understanding of their educators' needs for professional development and the best ways to achieve meaningful results, many service providers lack this insight. Much of the professional learning available, particularly in the private-for-profit sector, are one-off external training sessions that do not always respond effectively to the learning needs of educators. This 'one size fits all' approach to professional learning tends to result in a miss-match between educator needs and those of delivery method. Given the varied backgrounds and qualification levels of educators in education and

care services across Australia, such 'one off' training sessions have left many service providers struggling to source professional learning programs that meet the particular needs of their staff.

An approach to professional learning currently receiving much attention is that of mentorship. Said to reduce educator turnover, mentoring provides a valuable approach to support educators to come to grips with the ever-changing landscape in Australia. Defined as a long-term process, whereby a knowledgeable and more experienced person takes on the role of overseeing the learning of a less-experienced person, mentorship can have a positive impact on career development and professional learning. Using strategies such as coaching, role modelling and facilitating reflective practice, mentorship is a highly valuable method providing opportunities for learners to reflect on their own knowledge and adopt new approaches. Much like an alliance between two people within a beneficial framework, mentoring facilitates ongoing dialogue that is said to overcome 'some of the shortcomings of current approaches to training early childhood practitioners by offering on-the-job training and professional development opportunities' (Rodd, 2006, p. 172).

The success of a recent long-term mentorship study in Victoria offers further insight into this approach as a long-term strategy for many service providers across Australia. Driven by the challenges faced by educators managing newly imposed National Service Standards, the Victorian Government funded a statewide professional mentoring program (PMP) for early childhood teachers in 2011. Participants of the three-year study comprised educators new to the profession, and those who were professionally isolated and/or lacked professional collegiality. The study offered mentees the opportunity to openly discuss their experience with expert educators of similar background, and brainstorm solutions to their current frustrations. At the conclusion of the study, researchers summated that mentees significantly benefited from having the opportunity to collaborate with field experts as they offered invaluable insight into their extensive experience, which made them feel at ease. In the three years since its implementation, the mentorship study highlighted the value of long-term professional support for inexperienced educators, who consequently gained new ideas, were challenged to reflect on their own practice, gained mentoring skills themselves, and expanded their networks.

As demonstrated in the Victorian study, unlike typical approaches to professional learning, which involve attending external one-off workshops geared at

exploring various topics of interest, mentoring sessions 'in house' provide opportunities to unpack real issues over a sustained period with a greater potential to bring about immediate change. Approaches of this nature are thus considered more valuable in the context of the educators themselves. Reflective of the service dynamic, educators are able to focus on implementing approaches that are consistent with their team and focus on the immediate environment.

Literature in support of a mentorship model is thus encouraging for service providers desperate to source more meaningful methods to support the professional development of their staff. Key to this personalised approach, however, is access to an experienced mentor that, for some service providers, might not be an easy task. While some mentors can be sourced externally for a fee, others are readily available within the service environment. Such educators are those who demonstrate knowledge and experience that could be of value to others, which in many services are plentiful. Therefore, review of current expertise levels is highly recommended.

Experienced mentors, whether sourced internally or externally, must have the following characteristics in order to bring about positive change in any context:

- Be committed to the role of mentoring long term.
- Be accepting of the person they are mentoring.
- Be empathetic to varied learning levels and styles.
- Be skilled at providing instructional support.
- Be skilled at recognising each mentoring relationship as unique.
- Be skilled communicators.
- Be objective and non-judgemental.
- Be open to their own learning as well as the learning of others.
- Be tactful in providing feedback.
- Be optimistic and encouraging.

As explored in this article, mentorship can have a valuable impact on the professional learning needs of educators; therefore, it is important to consider the skill set available in the team before engaging external workshops that will not achieve the required results long term. Mentorship provides opportunities for educators to develop meaningful relationships and, more importantly, to overcome their isolation. **B**

Reference

Rodd, J. (2006). *Leadership in early childhood: the pathway to professionalism (4th ed)*. Crows Nest, New South Wales. Allen & Unwin.