A mentoring approach to professional learning

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We are fortunate in the field of early childhood to rarely work in isolation. On any given day, in fact, we have wonderful opportunities to reflect on our own practice and learn from other colleagues. While such opportunities are plentiful, we often find ourselves focused on other matters without making time for our own professional learning. For many services, such is a common predicament, especially as we focus our energy on responding to government policy changes. In this article, I advocate for a mentorship approach, and encourage centre directors to delve deeper into a collaborative process that acknowledges daily reflection as central to long-term professional learning.

Depicted in Quality Area 4: Staffing Arrangements, the expectation under the National Quality Standards is that 'educators, coordinators and staff members work collaboratively and affirm, challenge, support and learn from each other to further develop their skills and to improve practice' (ACECQA, 2009, p.115). Demonstrated by establishing a culture of professional inquiry, centre directors are expected to facilitate opportunities and review practices on a regular basis. Due to time constraints and/or knowledge capacity, it is not uncommon for such professional learning to be outsourced, with sessions hosted outside the centre by external training providers. Given varied backgrounds, qualification levels and experience, such 'one-off' training sessions do not always respond well to group learning needs, notwithstanding the financial burden they impose.

As an academic and early childhood consultant, I too have witnessed disgruntled educators needing more professional learning support, especially given the introduction of National Service Standards. Fuelling an even deeper interest of mine, the topic of professional learning became central to my Doctoral research. Adopting a 'Community of Practice' model (Wenger, 1998), I specifically explored the benefit of a 'critical mentor' contributing to educator professional dialogue. Facilitating regular reflective practice sessions during the six-month study, I mentored participants across four contexts and recorded their reflective professional learning journey.

Before I delve into my findings, it is important to explore key processes fundamental to successful professional learning: reflective practice, 'Communities of Practice' and mentorship. Identified as one of the five principles underpinning the Early Years Learning Framework, reflective practice is a complex process and one that is a relatively new for educators in the sector. According to the framework, 'Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice' (ACECQA, 2009, p.13). Said to enhance teaching and learning, reflective practice is a process where educators reflect on their setting and think about what changes need to be made.

'Communities of Practice' are groups of people who share a common interest and through interaction, learn from one another and make improvements. Inspired by scholars such as Brown and Vygotsky, the notion of 'Communities of Practice' is viewed as both a simple and complex social system, embedded in settings where dual processes of meaning making take place. Engaging with others directly in conversation and reflection is but one part of this process. The other involves the collection of tools, artefacts, documents and resources reflecting on the shared experience; however, unless 'Communities of Practice' are deliberately created and fostered they 'become people with some shared interest but no real cohesion'

(Hoadley, 2012, p. 292). Therefore, successful 'Communities of Practice' involve participants who are purposely created by experienced mentors and supported by the provision of professional learning strategies, such as modelling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection and exploration.

The concept of mentorship is not a new phenomenon. In fact, literature is now widely available from a variety of local and international sources. As more evidence emerges about the value of this as a reflective professional learning approach, we can start 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, 2012, p. 172). Opportunities for learners to reflect on their own knowledge is best achieved when supported by a mentor in the workplace. Much like an alliance between two people, dialogue results in reflection, action and learning for both parties.

To explore contextualised professional learning, I adopted all three abovementioned processes (reflective practice, 'Communities of Practice' and mentorship) in my study, and documented my findings over an extended period. What became evident early on was the value of providing a forum for educators to openly reflect on their daily experience without the pressure of having to come to some kind of resolution. What started from simple group chats after work, led to collaborative decision making and forward planning. From one month to the next, educators became more comfortable and honest, respecting other viewpoints. Seated in a circle at the beginning of each session, the critical mentor drew upon previous discussions and asked questions about how actions were progressing. Over time, various issues became topical, and thus featured more regularly in collaborative discussion and problem-solving.

Preliminary findings of this study demonstrate the importance of validating the wealth of knowledge educators possess, and focus professional learning efforts on contextualised opportunities. While an external mentor is beneficial, collaborative sessions are relatively simple to organise, and can be led by a confident centre director and/or educational leader. Given there is commitment on the part of all participants, regular 'Community of Practice' sessions can be a successful conduit for change, and empower participants to take responsibility for shared learning.

Steps to facilitating successful collaborative learning sessions:

- create a culture of collective strength where each educator is valued
- treat the traditional staff meeting as a 'Community of Practice' session with a focus on collaborative discussion; this avoids doubling up meetings
- set up your 'Community of Practice' session in a circle where educators are on an equal playing field
- pose a topic/s for discussion and/or questions for resolution, such as, 'We have become challenged by our new meal routine. What are your thoughts about what we have recently adopted?'
- seek out opinions rather than directing others 'what to do'
- support educators to trial group suggestions
- focus on resolution and set reasonable goals
- document decisions/suggestions in QIP and follow up in subsequent meetings.

The mentorship model explored above is a positive way in which any centre can respond to its professional learning needs, without the pressure of outsourcing externally. Such an approach empowers the entire team to respond effectively to National Service Standard 4, and successfully demonstrate:

- an approach to professional learning where using particular strengths, talents and interests of individual educators, coordinators and staff members is evident
- evidence where the service has regular team meetings that focus on and include collaborative work that affirms, challenges, supports and provides opportunities to learn from each other, to further develop the team's skills
- ways in which staff members in the team support and mentor each other
- evidence where new information, and innovative ideas and approaches are gathered, shared and enacted (ACECQA, 2009, p.115).

References

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