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Is “Mentoring” the right word? A case study into praxis in the field

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Abstract

Objectives: An investigation into how mentoring is understood by researchers, teachers and school leaders.

Theoretical framework: Sensemaking

Methods: *Case Study* considering the conflation of mentoring with coaching, supervision, counselling and induction, employing the theoretical framework of Weick (1995) by mapping and triangulating multiple data sources

Data sources: School leaders’ mentoring aims; field notes; interviews (28 mentors & 30 mentees); review of 116 articles from 2005-2014.

Results: School leaders and the literature position mentoring in pragmatic, instrumentalist terms. Teacher mentees’ perceived it as performance management. The literature conflated coaching, mentoring, counseling, supervision and induction.

Scholarly significance: Positioning mentoring as pragmatic limits its potential. A strong theoretical foundation, conceptually separating mentoring praxis from coaching, supervision and induction is needed.

Objectives: The praxis of mentoring in schools is a series of interactions between two or three professionals, who formally take on different roles resulting from their structural position. The actual pattern of interactions will reflect previous involvement with mentoring, level of training and historical perceptions of mentoring. This process is complicated because the role of ment/or(ee) is just one of the different roles the actors assume in the organization. They are at the same time (senior) teacher, subject specialist, colleague, friend, etc. This level of complexity is compounded by a lack of clear understanding about what is supposed to take place. The process lacks an agreed and robust theory to guide the praxis (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Following on from the work of Hall, Draper, Smith, and Bullough (2008) who studied pre-service teachers’ perceptions of mentoring this paper reports an investigation into how mentoring is understood in the field by researchers, teachers and school leaders. Coaching and mentoring are recognised as important in advancing teaching and learning (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). However, mentoring, coaching, and to a certain extent induction, remain conflated in the literature (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). “[E]ven the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, the most active body in bringing the worlds of coaching and mentoring together, cannot achieve a single definition acceptable to all” (Clutterbuck, 2009, p.1) making their implementation and evaluation problematic. Roberts (2000) argued that agreement on what constitutes mentoring is necessary for clear communication about the subject, and Mertz (2004) supported this as the precursor to a cohesive empirical research base

on the effectiveness of mentoring. To date this lack of articulation continues to lessen confidence in research findings (Clutterbuck, 2013). Therefore for this study, we sought to understand how mentoring is perceived by those most deeply invested in its use: teacher mentors and mentees and to map the conflation or lack of articulation in order to make sense of how it's evolved.

Theoretical framework: We adopted Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as a way to describe and understand the praxis of mentoring. We started with the “chaos” of the undefined nomenclature that surrounds the conflation of mentoring with coaching, supervision, counselling and induction (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 411). Sensemaking involved “being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, ‘What’s the story?’” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410). We investigated educational researchers, teachers and school leadership perceptions of mentoring, as they each influence the other.

Since Homer's Odyssey mentoring has had its roots in protection and counselling. Mentors and mentees are focused on personal development. “Mentoring can be defined as a relationship between two people and a process-oriented facilitation” (Riley, 2009, p. 236). Clutterbuck (2009) also argued that mentoring focuses more on mentee personal growth and career aspirations. Mentoring from our perspective does not separate personal growth from professional development as each influences the other. However, following the introduction of coaching in schools, as a means of developing teachers' capabilities, coaching has tended to be re-named as mentoring. Coaching has ascribed goals focused toward skill development and positions the coach as the expert. Mentoring aims to develop the self, and involves inner work. Mentoring is driven by the mentee and is specific to their work and life. Mentoring, we argue, is concerned with developing *human, social, and decisional capital* (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Methods: We adopted a Sensemaking case study to consider a variety of interpretations and the processes of mentoring in depth. The case is bounded in four distinct ways. The first boundary is conceptual: the perceptions of mentoring praxis by teachers involved in the process, either as mentors or mentees. Approximately one third of the participants were both mentors and mentees concurrently. The second boundary is systemic: participant schools operate in one of two parallel education systems: a) The Government System, that is open to all students; and b) the Catholic System, whose students are predominantly, but not exclusively Catholic and the teachers have received complementary training in Religious Education alongside mandated pre-service education. The case is bounded geographically by nine schools (4 Catholic and 5 Government) spread across Melbourne, Australia. The social boundary confines the study to teachers working in the compulsory years and the first two years of post-compulsory schooling: from 5-18 year-old students (5 Elementary and 3 Secondary). The final boundary involved creating a literature review matrix to *map the confusion, organize the flux, bracket and label* the findings, and *communicate our understandings* (sensemaking) to each other (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

The mentoring project that forms the case was based on a developmental mentoring program offered to schools by the authors. At the beginning of the project mentors were introduced to the theory of Emotional Labour, and micro politics (Struyve &

Kelchtermans (2013). After which the Participatory Inquiry Program (PIP: Gallant, 2013) was taught to mid-level teachers, and the Contextual, Insight-Navigated Discussion (CIND: Riley, 2009, 2011) was taught to senior school staff. After completing the course PIP mentors worked with graduate teachers in either their first, second or third year of service, and were also mentored by the senior staff using CIND.

Data sources: We collected school mentoring aims (written by school leaders), analysed our field notes and conducted 58 structured interviews (28 mentors and 30 mentees). These data were drawn from nine schools mentioned above. The review of the literature covered 116 articles within the field of education, whose titles and abstracts contained “mentoring”, and were published within the last decade (2005-2014)¹. The articles reported studies from 16 different countries allowing us to ascertain international similarities and differences in perception (USA, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, China, Ukraine, Israel, Turkey, Chile, Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Canada, UK, New Zealand and Australia).

Results: The findings suggest that we are no closer to an agreed definition. Of the 30 interviews conducted with early career mentees (≥ 3 years experience) all but one used coaching terms to describe their needs in the mentoring relationship. Each one often claimed they needed direction from their mentor via the use of classroom observation, feedback on planning, and tips and tricks with such areas as classroom management. They referred to mentoring as helping skill development, using instrumentalist terms.

The literature tended to conflate mentoring with, coaching, (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough Jr., 2008; Schwille, 2008) counseling (Ambrosetti, 2014; Britzman, 2009; Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010), supervision (Graves, 2010; Lee, 2010; Levy & Johnson, 2012; Sim, 2011), professional development (Ulvik & Smith, 2011), induction (OECD, 2014), and communities of practice (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010). Mentoring is loosely seen as a joint venture requiring commitment and responsibility, and active involvement in development and change (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). Mentoring was also often represented in pragmatic terms. School leaders and teachers perceived mentoring as a performance management tool (McLaughlin, Veale, McIlwrick, de Groot, & Wright, 2013), and generally from the perspective of a deficit (mentee) model of intervention. Triangulating the data from the literature, school mentoring aims, field notes and interviews led to the conclusion that the Apprenticeship of Observation (AoO: Lortie, 1975) has emerged as a professional development framework, which conflates mentoring with supervision, coaching and induction. AoO is underpinned by the perception that teaching is one of transmission and presents as a technical rationality, which is grounded in the cognitive (Bullock, 2013, p.121).

The AoO has long been known to interfere with pre-service teacher education (Bullock, 2013; Darling-Hammond 2006; Russel, 2008) due to its false representation of what it means to be a teacher and to teach. And yet despite numerous calls for reform in teacher education this technical, rationalized, framework persists and has emerged as a professional development framework for practicing teachers.

Scholarly significance: Mentoring has the potential to enhance teacher development

¹ This list can be accessed by writing to the corresponding author

throughout the course of their careers. However, current perceptions about the praxis of mentoring as a pragmatic (sometimes deficit) model stymie its potential. The deficiency of the model was outlined by Britzman, (2009) in a reconceptualization of the relationship between the teacher and mentor from a psychodynamic perspective. While not denying potential deficits in skill that the teacher may or may not display, Britzman's perspective encourages the idea that growth is reliant on deep self-examination of the desire to teach and the courage to explore the unknown. She criticizes the needs model and points to an underlying flaw in the system that relies on growth and improvement of the members of the system through a needs system.

It is as if, in the effort to distinguish firmly good from bad and success from failure, the profession must guarantee itself before the time of understanding. In other words, the profession is caught in the trap of repeating mantras of teaching without remembering or working through childhood fantasies, anxieties and defences made from being educated while educating others (Britzman, 2009, p. 386-6).

Redefining the praxis of mentoring through a strong theoretical foundation that conceptually separates the praxis from coaching, supervision, induction and networking offers mentors and mentees greater scope for developing their full potential. If a teacher's capital (human, social and decisional) is not fostered it is unlikely s/he will be able to promote the democratizing possibilities of education nor advance justice, and "the democratizing possibilities of education remain forestalled" (AERA, 2014).

We offer these attributes of the salient features of mentoring and coaching to articulate another possible framework, which differentiates both from AoO:

1. Mentoring is directed by the mentee. The focus is getting to know and articulate what influences one's practice and why. The mentor takes the cues from the mentee, asks questions to help ascertain clarity (developing human, social and decisional capital). It is therefore non-judgmental, aims to facilitate the development of the whole person, and is transformational, focusing on self-discovery: articulating the unknown personal and professional self through dialogue. It is about identity formation.
2. In contrast coaching is didactic. It is essentially the same method underpinning instruction, pre-service teacher supervision, and induction. Coaching aims to improve performance through practice, passing on knowledge, observation, and modeling. The coach directs the process and success is determined through competency-based assessments, often student results. The emphasis is on skill transmission and time for practice. The coach is the arbiter of progress, and problem solver, who works toward predetermined goals. In mentoring the mentee is the problem solver (and often problem poser). S/he sets the goals.

Both coaching and mentoring are needed at different times for teachers to develop fully. However, they are different processes, which if clearly articulated and understood can be used more appropriately.

What emerged from this study is the connection between vague definitions of mentoring and how teachers' work is increasingly seen as performance: managed into becoming technicians, following a myth that uniformity of practice will equate with quality of student outcomes. Under this instrumentalist model the practices must be developed by experts and transmitted to novices. However, the ubiquitous finding from the literature that teachers benefit from being managed in some way by "an expert", sits uneasily with the growing call for an increase in teacher quality. This challenges the ubiquity of the conclusions about teacher development through performance management.

We argue that it might be time to allow teachers to grow into the variety of roles they will encounter during a career through dialogue with a mentor who takes what Britzman (2009) described as an ironic stance: someone able to question how and why questions are asked and why they arise at particular temporal junctions, to really question who they are and the context in which they operate. While there is general agreement that mentoring and coaching have positive effects for both the mentees, the students mentees teach (Cohen & Fuller, 2006; Fuller, 2003; Fletcher, Strong and Villar, 2008; Glazerman et al., 2010; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; OECD 2013), and sometimes for the mentors as well (Riley, 2009, 2011), it remains unclear which elements, beyond support and assistance, create the positive effects. It is equally unclear which, if any, have little or no real impact on mentee development. Given the financial difficulties facing education into the long-term future, it would be wise to concentrate on some of these answers. If research can determine which aspects of mentoring, coaching and the plethora of other "interventions" are the key elements of teacher growth, a clearer evidence base can be established for improving practice.

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