

CHAPTER
4

Mentoring in early childhood settings: an exploration of experiences of early childhood staff in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

A major childcare provider in Singapore established a new role, that of a 'Mentor Teacher' as a professional pathway for those aspiring to leadership roles in the early childhood sector. This recognition of mentoring can be seen as a leadership development and quality improvement strategy to enhance the professional growth of practitioners, both as individuals and collectively as a profession. Both employers and governments have also perceived mentoring as an effective approach to improving program quality in the sector. This study aimed to collect research based data about mentoring practices that were currently occurring in Singapore and to ascertain beliefs about mentoring held by early childhood practitioners in the country, with a view to influencing future practice and policy in the sector.

Keywords: Singapore, mentoring, early childhood leadership

ABSTRAKTI

Merkittävä varhaiskasvatuksen toteuttaja Singaporessa toteutti uuden roolin, mentoriopettajan, ammatillisena polkuna niille, jotka haluavat johtajuusrooleja varhaiskasvatuksessa. Mentoroinnin huomiointi voidaan nähdä johtajuuden kehittymisenä ja laadun kehittämisen strategiana, että saavutetaan työntekijöiden ammatillista kasvua sekä yksilöinä että yhteisöinä. Sekä työnantajat että hallitus pitävät mentorointia tehokkaana tapana laadun kehittämisessä. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli kerätä aineistoa mentoroinnin käytänteistä, jotka olivat käytössä Singaporessa ja varmistaa niitä uskomuksia, joita työntekijöillä oli mentoroinnista pyrkien vaikuttamaan tulevaisuuden käytänteisiin ja menettelytapoihin.

ABSTRAKT

En stor barnehagetilbyder i Singapore har etablert en ny rolle, en 'veiledningslærer' som en faglig vei for de som har ambisjoner om en lederrolle i barnehagesektoren. Denne erkjennelsen av veiledning kan sees som en lederutviklings- og kvalitetsforbedringsstrategi for å styrke den faglige veksten av utøvere, både som individer og kollektivt som profesjon. Både arbeidsgivere og myndigheter har oppfattet veiledning som en effektiv tilnærming for å forbedre programkvaliteten i sektoren. Denne studien hadde som mål å samle inn forskningsbaserte data om de veiledningspraksiser som forekommer i Singapore, og å bekrefte oppfatninger personalet i barnehagene i landet har om veiledning, med sikte på å påvirke fremtidig praksis og politikk i sektoren.



INTRODUCTION

The Early Childhood Context in Singapore

In 2010, in Singapore, one of the major providers running 100 early childhood (EC) centres developed a professional career role in mentoring for early childhood teachers with the professional title of a 'Mentor Teacher'. This role was considered to be a senior role comparable to the Vice-Principal level at an EC centre but it did not carry any formal staff performance management or other supervision responsibilities. The development of this professional role reflected the importance of mentoring within the EC sector given that it was increasingly recognised by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and sector employers. In 2012, mentoring as a possible career pathway for EC practitioners was acknowledged by the MOE as a means of "strengthening the professionalism of the workforce" and providing a "developmental map for professionals to aspire towards different specialist career pathways and training opportunities" (Ang, 2012, p. 56).

In 2013, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) announced the creation of teaching and leadership pathways. It was aimed at offering different career aspirations for EC practitioners as well as by enhancing service quality, making it more attractive to work in the sector (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2013). These pathways included the selection and grooming of Mentor Principals and Master Teachers to take on the responsibilities that could benefit the whole EC sector. It was however difficult to identify specific formal statements about these mentor teacher positions in government policy. According to Singapore's Preschool Qualifications Accreditation Committee (PQAC), only senior teachers with at least three years of teaching experience may serve as mentors to student teachers

completing practicum placements (MOE-MCYS Preschool Qualification Accreditation Committee, 2008). However, little has been published about the required qualifications, qualities and years of experience of those being employed as EC mentors to their peers working in the sector.

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the nature of the mentoring that was occurring in EC centres in Singapore. Research based evidence on mentoring can assist the articulation and implementation of mentoring policies in the EC sector in Singapore. As such, the findings of this study may be of interest to policy makers, employers, practitioners and training organisations in Singapore. The two key research questions being addressed were: 1. What are the current practices of mentoring in EC centres?, and 2. What are the beliefs about mentoring held by EC practitioners?

MENTORING RESEARCH

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2012), the quality of EC programs and its workforce is reliant on EC staff qualifications and their participation in continuous professional development. The Singapore government as with other governments globally, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, has in recent years focused on mentoring as an effective approach to enhance the quality of the EC workforce and its programs (Ang, 2012).

In the past decade, however, there has been no systematic attempt to study mentoring of staff employed within EC settings. There is anecdotal evidence of mentoring that takes place within EC settings and more broadly in the sector referred to by practitioners during informal conversations. While a number of studies have considered the outcomes and benefits of mentoring for an individual's professional development (Elliott, 2008; Long, 1997, 2010; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Rush, Blair, Chapman, Codner & Pearce, 2008; Simpson, Hastings & Hill, 2007) these studies have not considered the relationship aspects of peer mentoring. Overall, the stark lack of rigorous research on mentoring of EC staff, makes it difficult to comment on the extent to which mentoring is an effective approach to improve program quality within EC settings or its benefits for the sector as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

In designing the data collection instruments and methods, a mixed methods approach (Johnston & Christensen, 2008) was used in this study. This

approach enabled the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative research strategies and techniques, consisting of a survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), a mixed methods approach can improve the overall quality of the research design when investigating hitherto under-researched concepts or phenomenon such as mentoring. The strategic combination of qualitative and quantitative strategies can enable the development of “an overall design that is complementary in strengths and non-overlapping in weaknesses” (Johnston & Christensen, 2008, p. 443).

Instruments

In this research, practitioners were invited to complete a survey questionnaire comprising a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. This approach reflects the inductive mode of qualitative studies where data are collected to discover, describe and explore research objectives that are subjective, personal and socially constructed (Johnston & Christensen, 2008). The survey enabled participants to illustrate their perceptions and experiences of mentoring. The survey yielded a clean data set based on 155 participants, making it possible to present a broad snapshot of mentoring in EC settings in Singapore.

Following ethical approval being granted by Macquarie University’s Human Ethics Research Committee, this study was situated within the 100 child-care centres managed by one of the largest employers of EC practitioners in Singapore. Each centre received a package comprising original copies of an information brief about the study, a consent form and a survey questionnaire. Staff completing the surveys were also invited to participate in a follow up interview to explore key issues in more depth. Interview data have not been used in this chapter as it will focus exclusively on the analysis of the survey data.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised Principals, Acting/Vice-Principals, Senior Teachers and/or English Teachers. Overall, 45% of the centres accepted the invitation to participate in this research, and a total of 155 staff completed the survey questionnaire. The survey included a series of questions on participants’ demographic characteristics and data collated from these questions are presented below.

Participants	Principals, Acting/Vice Principals 16%	Senior Teachers, English Teachers 62%	Others (mainly assistants) 22%		
Qualifications	Certificate 12%	Diploma 49%	Degree 26%	Masters 1%	No Qualifications 12%
Years of Experience	Less than 4 years 54%	5–10 years 26%	11–15 years 12%	16–20 years 7%	21–25 years 1%
Ethnicity	Chinese 42%	Malay 35%	Indian 12%	Eurasian 2%	Others 8%
Age Range	Below 30 years 60%	31–40 years 19%	41–50 years 15%	51–60 years 6%	

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Almost half (49%) the participants had completed a Diploma in Early Childhood and another quarter (26%) had achieved an early childhood degree. It can also be seen that 54% had worked in EC centres for less than four years and less than 10% had worked in the sector for more than 16 years. Overall, 60% of the participants were below 30 years of age with 42% identifying themselves to be Chinese.

DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

The survey questions were designed as mainly categorical variables. Therefore, Chi-Squared analyses were used to determine associations between pairs of variables. Qualitative data analysis identified major themes or overarching patterns in the data. The key findings from the survey about mentoring practices, skills, qualities, responsibilities and beliefs are summarised below.

Practice of Mentoring

Of the 155 participants that completed the survey, 59% indicated that their centres currently had a formal mentoring program in place. The participants were however not asked to provide details about the nature of these programs. In the survey data, the remaining 41% were employed in a centre that did not have a mentoring program. However, 64% participants reported that

they have experienced mentoring at some time during their career. Again no details were supplied in the survey about these mentoring experiences.

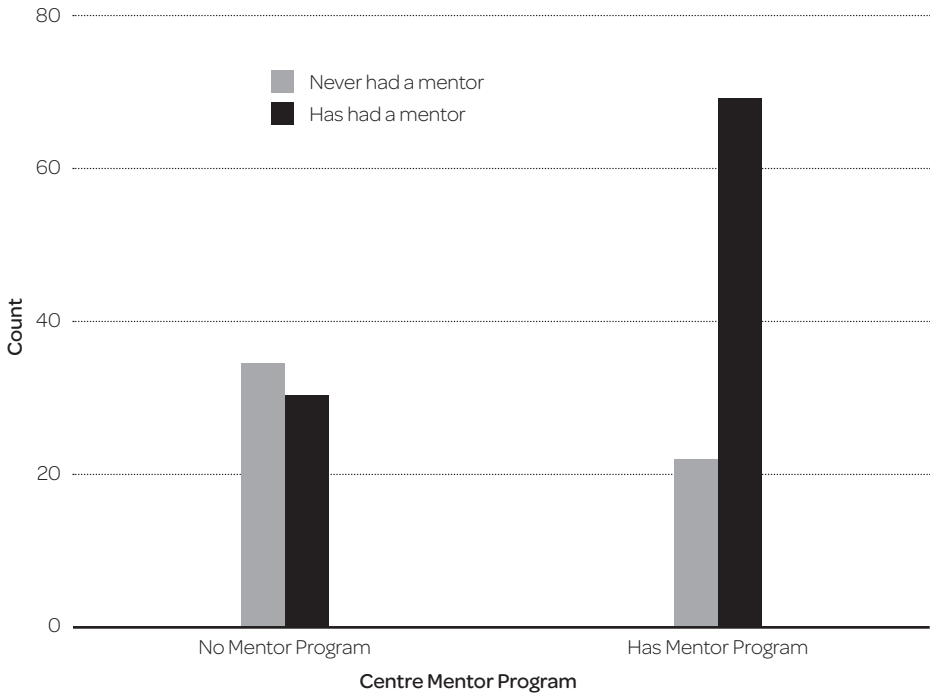


Figure 1: Experience of mentoring

Chi-Square analysis found a significant association between centres that were identified as having a mentoring program in place and the participants who reported to have a mentor. Figure 1 results show that there was a significant association between participants' experience of mentoring and their place of employment, because they had been employed in a centre that had a formal mentoring program ($\chi^2(1) = 13.646, p = .005$).

Out of the 99 participants who reported having a mentor at sometime during their career, 28% reported that they had daily contact with their mentor, another 51% maintained contact weekly, 5% monthly and 3% annually. Participants also rated their mentoring experiences on a 4-point Likert scale with 52% identifying these as being either *successful*, 43% as *somewhat successful*, 4% as *neither successful nor unsuccessful* and 1% as *unsuccessful*. Figure 2 indicates that the more frequent the contact occurred in the mentoring relationship, the more successful the participant rated the mentoring experience ($\chi^2(4) = 19.746, p = .001$).

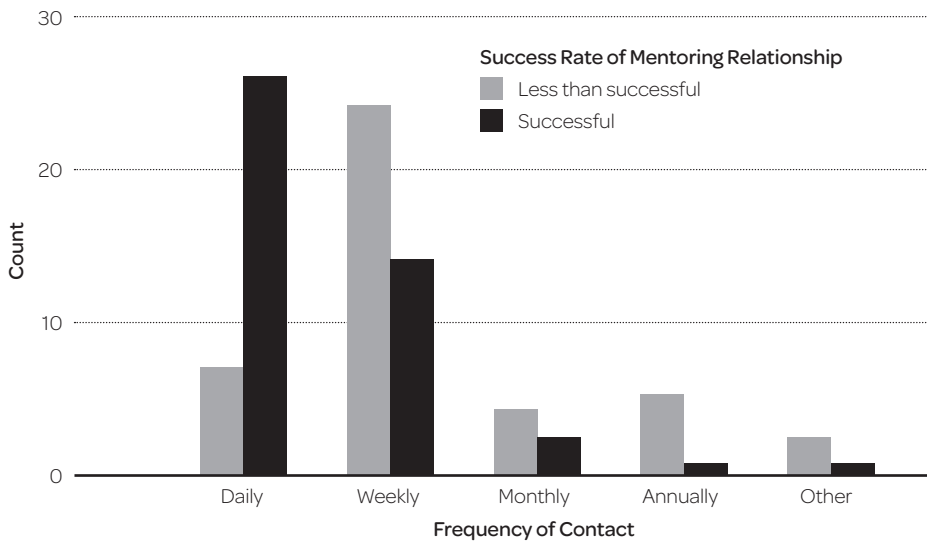


Figure 2: Successful mentoring experiences

Participants were also asked to comment if they felt that their employer or boss could be their mentor. The mean and standard deviation of the participants' responses to this question indicated that the majority believed that their boss/employer can be their mentor only under specific circumstances ($M = 2.88, SD = 0.92$). No significant relationship was however found between the participants who believed that their boss can be their mentor and their ratings of success in their mentoring experiences ($\chi^2(2) = 5.578, p = .061$).

Examination of the relationship between participants who had a mentor and their qualifications indicate that 64% of participants who reported having a mentor at some point in their career, 12% had completed a Certificate in Early Childhood, 49% had a Diploma, 26% a Bachelor Degree, 1% a Masters Degree. Interestingly, 19% of survey participants had no EC qualifications. Using Chi-Square analysis, a significant relationship was found between a participant having a mentor at some point during their career and the level of qualifications the participant had completed. That is, those participants who identified as having successful mentoring experiences had completed an EC Diploma or a Degree ($\chi^2(4) = 17.389, p = .002$).

In relation to the years of experience in EC settings and duration of mentoring experiences, the majority of participants (41%) experienced having a mentor for less than six months, and another 32% with 7–12 months, 16% with 2–3 years and 10% with more than four years. Overall, 54% of the participants reported having less than four years of experience in EC settings.

The remaining 71 participants reported their experiences across four options: 5–10 years 26%, 11–15 years 12%, 16–20 years 7% and 21–25 years 1%.

Given this wide range with limited numbers in each category, this variable of work experience was recoded against two options as either less than four years or more than four years experience. A significant association was found between the participants' years of experience in EC settings and the duration of the mentoring relationships experienced. Those who had worked in EC settings for less than four years reported having a mentor for at least six months and between 7–12 months ($\chi^2(3) = 8.695, p < .034$).

Key Responsibilities & Skills of Mentors

When asked to nominate key responsibilities of mentors, the top three responsibilities selected were: *observe staff in daily work and provide feedback* (52%); *demonstrate effective teaching practice to other staff* (48%); and *manage staff in fulfilling their job requirements* (32%). When asked to rank in order of importance of eight essential skills required of a mentor, 34% ranked the mentors' *modelling good teaching practice* as the number one skill expected of an EC peer mentor, and this was followed by skills of *listening to staff* (23%) and *communicating clearly* (16%). The mentor's ability to challenge and debate issues was ranked least important (2%).

Key Qualities of Mentors

When asked to select the five most important qualities or dispositions that they considered important for an EC mentor those selected were:

- ◆ open to ideas – flexible (74%)
- ◆ respectful (68%),
- ◆ positive (55%)
- ◆ has integrity (55%)
- ◆ trustworthy (53%).

The least preferred qualities included:

- ◆ demanding in search of accuracy (3%)
- ◆ ambitious (3%)
- ◆ cautious (4%)
- ◆ concerned with risk and assessment (9%)
- ◆ focused (19%).

Beliefs about Mentoring

An overwhelming majority (92%) of participants felt that being a mentor could enhance their professional growth, with 82% indicating that being a mentor would enable them to support other staff to understand their role better. The majority of participants (76%) also felt that mentoring skills could be *learnt through experience*. A minority (8%), thought that being a mentor was *the same as being a centre director/manager*.

DISCUSSION

This study addressed two key questions about EC practitioners' experiences and beliefs about peer mentoring in EC settings in Singapore. Previously, Wong and Waniganayake (2013) had conceptualised the interconnectivity between three dimensions of mentoring comprising the qualities, skills and responsibilities of EC staff involved in a mentoring relationship. The findings of this survey affirm that this conceptualisation reflects peer mentoring experienced by EC practitioners working in Singapore.

Beliefs about Mentoring

In seeking conceptual clarity, mentoring can be discussed under three broad dimensions that underpin its relationship dynamics: qualities, skills and responsibilities. These dimensions reflect the conceptualisation of an early childhood leader as depicted by Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) and Rodd (2006); and considered appropriate for use in unpacking the concept of peer mentoring, an associated leadership construct applicable within the EC sector. The findings of this study are discussed in relation to each of these three dimensions.

a) Qualities

Souto-Manning and Dice (2007), Trubowitz (2004), and Wang (2001), consider effective mentors to demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm to the learning process as well as being flexible, patient and diplomatic. These qualities have been recognised as being critical where successful mentors were seen as having emotional positiveness, being professional, nurturing, collegial, consistent and helpful (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez & Ballou, 2002; Bouquillon, Sosik & Lee, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005). In fostering reciprocal mentoring relationships, the individuals involved are expected to be dynamic, caring, affirming and wholehearted (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005;

Le Cornu, 2005). In the current study, the majority of participants (74%) considered being open to ideas or flexible as the most important quality of a mentor. This suggests that those in a mentoring relationship expect to be challenged about their professional practice as well as be open to receiving constructive feedback.

b) Skills

While the mentor's ability to coach is seen as an important asset in developing skills and improving performance as a teacher, coaching processes must not be confused with the broader range of skills that a mentor requires (Higgins, Young, Weiner & Wlodarczyk, 2009; Roberts, 2000; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen & Bolhuis, 2007). Comments by Le Cornu (2005) who suggests that two sets of skills are important in mentoring is useful in making this separation between coaching and mentoring. Firstly, highly developed interpersonal skills appear to be key in a mentoring relationship because communication involves listening, reflecting, questioning, confirming, describing, challenging and debating. This is especially important within education contexts, where one's own teaching pedagogy and practice continues to evolve through experience over time (Simpson et al., 2007; Yip, 2003). The participants in this study indicated that listening to staff and communicating clearly were among the top three essential skills of a mentor. The ability to communicate with sensitivity and confidence can enhance development of trust and provides a comfortable atmosphere for continuing communication about professional matters that were reciprocal and emphatic.

Secondly, Le Cornu (2005) considers critical reflection skills to be essential when transforming and improving one's own practice and pedagogy. This requires more than repetition of learnt skills and strategies that a coach may teach someone. Critical reflection includes exploring one's beliefs and values. The purpose of critical reflection is to question and analyse one's assumptions that underpins professional practice and to evaluate its effectiveness and responsiveness to changes within professional contexts (Davey & Ham, 2010). According to Couse and Russo (2006), the development of critical reflection skills is important because it can enable practitioners to engage in professional dialogue with peers and be an active participant in mentoring relationships. In this way, both mentor and mentee have agency in co-constructing their professional skills and knowledge base through the mentoring relationship. These learning conversations can therefore serve as opportunities to exchange ideas and beliefs, to be critiqued and challenged and serve as

a point for authentic evaluation of one's professional practice. Thus through this professional dialogue, multiple perspectives can be promoted and encouraged as opposed to conformity to a singular viewpoint (Le Cornu, 2005).

Critical reflective practice is core to the teaching profession because it embeds an approach to pedagogy that is reflective and reflexive in order to enhance practice and philosophy (Curtis & Carter, 2008). Mentoring processes that facilitate the growth and strengthening of critical reflective skills can therefore make a significant contribution to teacher professional development. Importantly, the survey data established that the top essential skill that the participants identified were the mentor's ability to model effective teaching practice. It appears that EC practitioners in Singapore also believed that coaching was an essential skill a mentor must possess. Little was mentioned however about critical reflection, and *challenging and debating of issues* was considered to be the least important skills expected of an EC mentor. It is however difficult to ignore that listening, open discussion and questioning skills mentioned by these participants do suggest engagement in some form of critical reflection. Likewise, it is also difficult to analyse the extent to which the absence of the words 'critical reflection' in this data set was due to either cultural bias or participants' competence in using English language explicitly. Likewise the use of the word mentoring and coaching interchangeably, may also reflect difficulties of expression or proficiency in using English language to articulate the subtle differences between these two concepts.

c) Responsibilities

How the mentoring relationship is established can impact the roles and responsibilities of the mentor. Onchwari and Keengwe (2008) refer to the role of an instructor or coach as being critical in facilitating the development of teachers. They discuss a mentor-coach model in terms of teacher professional development as an indicator for success in improving practice quality and as a means of successful change implementation when adopting new teaching methods. In order for teachers to feel supported and provided with opportunities for continued growth in their professional practice and pedagogy, peer observation and feedback have been considered important as part of critical reflective practice (Buzbee Little, 2005; Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007).

The majority of the survey participants (92%) perceived that being a mentor could enhance their professional growth. Only a small minority (8%) equated being a mentor to be the same as being the centre director or manager. These

participants were equally divided regarding who had either experienced or not experienced mentoring, making it difficult to separate their beliefs on the basis of their actual experiences of being mentored. This suggests that the experience of having a mentor may be related to the participant's knowledge base reflected by having completed a higher professional qualification.

LIMITATIONS

To a large extent, the survey questionnaire used in this study focussed mainly on the perceptions of the mentees and did not focus on the views of mentors. Many participants also referred to mentoring in terms of students on pre-service training placements at EC centres. This reflects a different mentoring context that falls outside centre based staff supervision arrangements, but these data could not be separated sufficiently to provide any clarity or comparative analysis of different structures or systems of mentoring available in Singapore. Above all, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the wider population of EC practitioners in Singapore because the data were limited to centres managed by one employer.

This study indicated that EC practitioners in Singapore were most likely to experience mentoring when they worked in a centre with a formal mentoring program. A significant association was also found where more frequent contact between the mentor and mentee was associated with successful mentoring relationships. It is therefore possible that when centres have a formal mentoring program in place, mentoring relationships may be more successful due to the possibility of frequent daily contact between mentors and mentee. However, without additional information about the nature of these interactions, further analysis of the significance of these relationships is not appropriate.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study suggest that mentoring relationships can provide opportunities for furthering professional learning for both the mentor and mentee in developing their skills, knowledge and practices as EC practitioners. This is affirmed by existing research which also suggests that mentoring relationships can be beneficial for the both the mentor (Elliott, 2008; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010; Zwart et al., 2007) and mentee's (John, 2008; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008, 2010; Simpson et al., 2007) journey of professionalisation within the early childhood sector.

This study also provides a number of important insights into understanding

the articulation and implementation of mentoring practices within a group of childcare centres managed by a single employer in Singapore. In particular, the significant association found between centres with a formal mentoring program and staff with high levels of EC qualifications infers that mentoring relationships can impact the continuing professional growth, practice, pedagogy and identity of the individuals involved in mentoring. These insights are of relevance to early childhood practitioners, employers as well as policy makers in Singapore in enhancing future practice and policy.



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