Mentoring School Leaders: Do Leaders need Leaders?

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Abstract

School leaders play an intricate part in the school climate and student achievement. Knowing how influential our school leaders are, more emphasis should be put on their continued growth and development, even after the completion of graduate coursework. Research supports mentoring to provide psychosocial support, recruitment and retention, to increase role socialization, to advance career development, and for networking (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Daresh, 2004, 2010; Ehrich et al., 2004; Searby, 2010). Although mentoring has its benefits, it can be detrimental if not implemented properly. It is essential to identify true mentors who are skilled in effective characteristics to mentor protégés. Mentoring should not be another task to check off that’s unmeaningful. Protégés, mentors, and school districts can gain from participation in a mentoring partnership. This paper reviews literature that supports the use of mentoring with school leaders to advance their leadership skills. Well prepared leaders build well-prepared school communities. Principal effectiveness is a direct correlation to teacher and student success. The growth wanting to see in schools starts with first developing their leaders. Keywords: mentoring, school leaders, professional development
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Becoming a school leader is an exciting accomplishment in the educational field. Teachers who have matriculated through the trenches of classroom endeavors and advanced graduate studies find themselves on a new adventure with little guidance or without knowledge of where to go for advice or next steps. The principalship or superintendentship comes with many responsibilities. The transition into a leadership role can be overwhelming and learning the expectations for the new role can be challenging (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Daresh, 2001; Searby, 2010). Often it can be a lonely journey to embark on if the leader has not established an interpersonal relationship with veteran leaders or colleagues. A common misconception is that leaders do not need help, and they are knowledgeable beyond needing professional development opportunities for continued growth. Some school districts provide professional development to school leaders through university courses, online courses, local sessions, and professional organization conferences to increase principal effectiveness. However, a study conducted by Grissom and Harrington (2010) indicated that mentoring was more effective than university coursework in increasing principal effectiveness as measured by teacher surveys and student achievement analysis.

There is substantial literature that supports the mentoring relationships as effective for teacher success and retention in the field (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Malone, 2002; Wood et al., 2013). However, there is insufficient evidence that looks at the impact of mentoring in school leadership, as it directly relates to principals or superintendents. This is shocking being that the leadership guides the school culture and ultimately impacts student achievement. The purpose of this literature review is to identify why mentoring leaders is essential and to identify traits of an effective mentoring program focused on the continued development of leaders. A
review of peer-reviewed published studies from the years 2000-2020 to identify themes of the benefits of establishing mentoring relationships for school leaders is discussed and identified characteristics for effective mentorship programs. For this literature review, school leaders are defined as a current practicing principal, superintendent, educational administrator or assistant principal. Since teachers are also often leaders in their prospective schools, it is vital to identify the target audience. The term protégé is used to describe the apprentice or mentee in the mentoring relationship.

**What is Mentoring?**

There are many definitions of the word mentoring. Understanding the meaning of mentoring brings to light the importance and effectiveness of participating in mentoring programs. Mentoring has evolved from the days of Homer’s odyssey, and while definitions of the word mentor may differ, the focus remains on guiding and supporting another (Daresh, 2004). Daresh (2001) elaborates that mentoring is a continuous process between individuals that provides support and guidance. Mentoring may vary based on study, the participants, and the centered goal to attain. Mertz (2004) explained that the complexity behind defining the term mentoring makes it challenging to discuss mentoring across contexts without clarifying that mentoring is being understood as the same entity. To address this challenge, Mertz proposed a conceptual model that focused on intent and involvement to develop a definition of mentoring that would be useful in creating a cohesive research collection. In practice, mentoring should be used to assist with growing the mindset of novice level professionals to increase their preparedness to take on the roles and obligations among success in their field. Mentoring can be a taboo thought for some adult learners. However, the interpersonal relationship process has proven to be impactful when appropriately utilized to gain insight for novice apprentices in any
field. Most importantly, mentoring is continuous. Novices one day will emerge into experts and the knowledge that has been attained from their mentorships will hopefully be passed on to another learner. This begins the cycle of continuous teaching and learning.

**Who is a Mentor?**

Mentoring relationships are different from other relationships that are supportive (Daresh, 2001). A common misconception is that the oldest person in an organization should serve as a mentor (Crippen & Wallen, 2008). The oldest and even the most experienced may not always be the most effective mentor. Effective mentors often are required to have a variety of skills that expand beyond the basic requirements for obtaining a position. A mentor is an experienced person who makes a commitment to assist with leading, helping, and guiding, a novice person in their professional growth (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). Crippen and Wallen (2008) conducted a study that resulted in a list of characteristics of effective mentors. The findings revealed that effective mentors have the following characteristics: listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, conceptualization, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of others. These were also listed as traits that protégés mentioned that they wanted to emulate from a mentor. Interestingly, age was not mentioned as an identifier of a mentor. This should encourage people to seek mentorship from people who exemplify the characteristics that are hoped to be obtained versus solely looking at title and years of experience.

Mentoring relationships can develop informally or through a formal mentoring program. Formal mentors are identified, managed, and authorized by the organization, in this case a school district (Herrbach et al., 2011). Whereas informal mentoring relationships develop seamlessly over time between individuals (Sosik et al., 2005). Some districts may assign novice principals with mentors from the district. Whilst, novice principals in other districts may connect with
informal mentors through an avenue of personal experiences outside of the school setting. Some principals may have both a mentor formally assigned to them through their district and an informal mentor outside of their district. Daresh (2004) says that it is advantageous to have someone in the district to advocate on your behalf and also have someone who you can talk with freely about grievances outside of your work environment to alleviate any retaliations about conflicting viewpoints. Whether a protégé is participating in formal or informal mentoring, both relationship types postulate the following functions to protégés: psychosocial support, role modeling, and career development (Sosik et al., 2005). This supports the findings of Browne-Ferrigno & Muth (2004) as well as Daresh (2001, 2004). These outcomes from participation can lead to growth in the district as common values are established and willingness to serve novices is embedded in the district’s culture.

**Benefits of Participation in Mentorship Opportunities**

Research reveals that school leaders, such as principals, grow when they have access to on-the-job support such as mentors attributable to the teaching and learning approach (Honig & Rainey, 2019). If school leaders are expected to build thriving schools that are promoting teaching and learning for students and teachers, then the school leaders must model this behavior. Identifying a mentor as a school leader not only provides a knowledgeable individual to answer unfamiliar questions but provides a long-lasting connection for socialization. The benefits of participating in mentoring expand beyond the focus of the protégé’s success. Local school districts, local universities, and mentors gain advantage from successfully implemented mentorships (Daresh, 2004). The mentor’s return for investing in novice leaders include exposure to new perspectives and ideas to address problems creatively from the protégés.
experiences, while school districts gain increased productivity, higher levels of staff motivation, and consistent development of proficient staff (Daresh, 2004).

Ehrich et al. (2004) reviewed a base of literature to analyze outcomes of mentoring across discipline areas. The discipline areas included business, education, and medicine. The literature distinguished and analyzed positive and negative mentoring outcomes as it relates to protégés, mentors, and large groups. They probed formal mentoring programs versus mentoring connections that were established naturally through personal or professional happenstances. After completing the exploration of various texts, the authors highlighted the four most identified beneficial conclusions that emerged. The findings showed that mentors in the educational studies rarely communicated a positive experience after completing a mentoring program, while protégés reported positive experiences more than half of the time. Ideally, mentoring is believed to connect theory and practice for novice leaders. Kram (1983) shared two main functions of a mentoring relationship: career functions and psychosocial functions. Kram described career functions as features of the relationship that enriches career progression. The psychosocial functions are those characteristics that enhance sense of proficiency and effectiveness in the work role.

**Psychosocial Support**

Psychosocial support was identified as one of the common results associated with positive outcomes from participating in a mentoring relationship (Browne-Ferrigno 2004, 2006; Ehrich et al., 2004). For school leaders to be effective and productive in completing their daily responsibilities, mental capacity must be in a functional space. Per informal interviews with local school administrators, the principalship can be a lonely journey. This may especially be true for principals in schools where they may not have assistant principals to collaborate with about the
daily operations and to brainstorm solutions to address school needs. The many roles and responsibilities of principals can cause stress and be able to discuss stressors and identify coping strategies can ensure the principals are taking care of themselves. Principals need a safe space where they receive feedback, advice, and encouragement (Ehrich et al., 2004). There is a certain level of trust that is required for the mentoring relationship to see benefits of the psychosocial functions.

**Recruitment and Retention**

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) projects a 4% increase in the need for school principals between 2019 and 2029. This is hypothesized to be a result of the mass retirement of baby boomers and the increase in student enrollment. There is a growing concern that current teachers may not be interested in moving into administration positions, which may have detrimental outcomes to local schools. The impact that mentoring can have on the recruitment and retention of leaders can be most appreciative in rural and urban areas. School boards in these areas often find themselves at a disadvantage (Wood et al., 2013). Veteran school administrators are the first to identify future potential school leaders and can be an asset in recruiting aspirants for local districts and universities. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2006) further elaborate on how the future of school administration rests on the nurturing and identification of emerging leaders by veteran principals. Those veteran principals serve as informal mentors and encourage aspirants to seek educational administration certifications. The process illustrates the ripple effect of positive mentoring relationships.

Aside from recruiting exceptional candidates, mentoring can be influential in retaining effective school leaders in the field of education. Wood et al. (2013) found that mentoring along with increased benefits worked well for a rural school district as a strategy to retain
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administrators. Many people do not consider that school leaders need mentors (Malone et al., 2002). In Principal Mentoring: An Update, the Malone et al. (2002) noted that one of the best ways to address the principal shortage is by matching new and veteran principals with a mentor. The article went on to share that everyone can benefit from a mentor, not just novice principals.

**Role Socialization**

The socialization into a new role can be challenging for novice administrators (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Moving away from the familiarity of an assistant principal or teacher role comes with many uncertainties that can cause apprehension towards making a confident mark on a new position. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) found that the development of a school leader does not simply derive from completion of coursework. Instead, they share that role socialization in part is a complex process that includes working closely with mentors to reflect and learn in real-life applicable field experiences (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). This supports the findings of O’Mahony (2003), and even accentuated a protégés reliance upon mentors to guide them as they conferred the process of their new role. The transition to a new role can be daunting as a person is urged to become more a more self-reliant leader in their respective schools.

**Professional & Career Development**

Many states have their own requirements to continue practice as a school administrator. In Alabama, school leaders are mandated to complete professional learning units (PLU), long term professional studies based on content, to continue their practice as school administrators (State of Alabama Department of Education, 2010). Properly implemented mentor experiences function as effective professional development for aspiring, novice, and veteran principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).
In the field of education, professional development is often looked at as a way to improve or stay relevant on effective strategies related to work development. Principals are expected to wear many hats in their roles. To better prepare for fulfilling their roles inside and outside of the school environment, Mathibe (2007) suggests professional development for principals. Mathibe conjectured that principals are unable to meet the expectation set forth by the state due to lack of development in needed areas. Professional development opportunities need to be useful and develop skills that principals can take back to their perspective environments to advance growth for all stakeholders. State and Federal guidelines also mandate certain levels of achievement in schools and principals are expected to spearhead these efforts, but sometimes need guidance on how to go about leading their school to reach those objectives.

Participating in professional development oftentimes is believed to have a positive correlation with work performance and success. Grissom and Harrington (2010) observed how some professional development opportunities may not always correlate to positive results from completion of unmeaningful tasks. Specifically, these authors looked at the positive relationship in mentoring and principal performance. The findings showed that principals were ranked more effective after participating in mentoring at a higher rate than participating in completion university coursework (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Astonishingly, principals who participated in university coursework professional development had lower passing rates on state and district standards. This finding shows the power of positive relationships in conjunction with acquired knowledge from coursework, and supports the findings of Daresh (2001, 2004).

Supporting the need for positive relationships, research shows that novice school leaders who are more likely to progress in their career if they have a formal or informal mentor (Reyes, 2003). Unfortunately, some barriers have been noted for career advancement based on gender,
but mentoring has been shown to build networks that increase females’ chances of job placements in school leadership positions. One major factor that has been reported of affecting advancement to leadership positions is a lack of a strong network or advocates. Kruse and Krumm (2016) completed a study with novice female principals that supports the findings of Reyes (2003). The findings indicated that all of the participants who presented having strong mentors indicated that they also have strong networks.

**Characteristics of Effective Mentoring Partnerships**

Effective mentoring relationships require for aspects to be embedded to ensure positive experiences for both the mentor and the mentee. Ehrich et al. (2004) looked mostly at mentoring as it involved teachers pursuing leadership positions. However, the recommendations for consideration prior to immersion in a mentoring partnership can be advantageous for any age, race, or occupation. To be proactive with overcoming challenges that may be associated with starting a connection, it is suggested that objectives be clear for all involved, resources should be obtained to maintain the partnerships, and training should take place for mentors (Daresh, 2004, 2010; Ehrich et al., 2004). Carefully constructed mentoring initiatives have been found effective. In contrast, poorly constructed mentoring programs can have a lasting negative impact on a protégé. Avoiding barriers like scheduling/time restraints, poor matching of mentors, and providing unproductive training can stagnate the mentoring experience (Malone, 2002). Taking time to meticulously survey the needs of each participant is crucial when considering encouraging participants to commit to the process as well as recruiting new participants for the next cycle (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Alsbury and Hackmann studied the effectiveness of a two-year mentoring program. The Iowa Mentoring and Induction (IAMI) program found that overall participants were satisfied by their experience. The IAMI program was strategic with
their protégé and mentor selection process, training session focuses, and adapting to the unique needs of the participants. Effective mentoring relationships should consider the following characteristics: meaningful matching of mentors and protégés, development of focus through action plans, and establishing clear expectations.

In order to have a positive mentoring relationship, trust must first be established. Building rapport is not an easy endeavor. Especially if establishing mentor-protégé relationships through a program without a prior relationship. In 2004, Kiltz et al. began a journey to form a mentoring model, Learner-Centered Leadership, for school administrators focused on professional development. The first stage of the mentoring process focused on building relationships. The authors underscored the importance of establishing trust, respect, and effective communication for the mentoring partnership to be successful in achieving its goals. The objective was to build a rapport among the organization, mentors, and protégés through a variety of collaborative activities (Kiltz et al., 2004).

The of pairing individuals for a mentor-protégé relationship can be complicated. If implementing a formal mentoring program to match leaders, it is important to join together people who have interests and can provide counsel that is needed. The pairing of leaders should be considered in a way that one does not feel subordinate. This will assist with transitioning away from power roles to peer relations, which will assist with openness and trust.

Mentors and protégés who participate through a formalized mentoring program must understand their function and the purposes of their sessions in order for the partnership to be effectual. There is extraordinary significance in identifying and developing common values in the mentoring relationship. Kiltz et al. (2004) executed the development of action plans by participants to bring together the focus of the program for the participants. The actions plan
allowed for the mentor and protégés to identify needs for the program to be centered around. The information attained from the action plan served as a road map for the program as they concentrated on attending to the needs of the participants.

When establishing a mentoring relationship, explicitly clear expectations and commitment should be agreed upon. Understanding the focus of the relationship and how participants will go about reaching the common goal is also a needed prerequisite. Protégés are encouraged to identify the level of commitment needed to get the results hoped for from the mentoring experience. This will allow for the participants, both mentor and protégé, to make knowledgeable decisions prior to undertaking the responsibilities associated with the partnership (Mertz, 2004). If a mentor is unable to provide the support that a protégé needs, then they have the option to seek another mentor. This directly supports the findings of Kiltz et al (2004), where participants are counseled to get a consensus for the shared vision to ensure a positive experience for both the mentor and protégé.

Prior to seeking out a mentoring relationship both the mentor and the protégé should reflect on their preparedness for the mentorship. Searby (2010) affirmed that mentoring has positive effects on leader achievement and acknowledged that new leaders need someone to assist them with their transition together with their continued growth development. From her research, she noted that most aspiring leaders shared that they assumed they would be assigned a mentor upon receiving a principalship, or a mentor would seek them out for mentorship. This data shows that a large number of aspirants may not be aware of the approach for obtaining a mentor. Searby suggests ways that protégés can prepare themselves to be mentored. The graduate course that was analyzed used the development of dispositions and personal reflections to build a mindset for mentoring. Some school leaders are focused on mentoring others and miss
out on the opportunity to seek mentoring experiences to enhance their own development. The results from Searby’s study showed that by the end of the course, students were able to identify the importance of mentoring, how to acquire a mentor, and how to prepare themselves for protégéship. The impact that the graduate coursework had on the aspiring principals’ mindset had lasting influence on their relationships with others as well as their success in the field of education (Searby, 2010).

Self-reflection is a time to examine one’s self. Educators are urged to reflect on their lessons, actions, and beliefs. This helps to form philosophies of education and serves as reminders of strengths, areas of improvements, and maps paths to reaching end goals in careers. Mentoring provides opportunity mutually for mentors and protégés to reflect (Crippen & Wallen, 2008). The ability to stop and ruminate can be a powerful tool that can be used to propel leaders forward in their career. Mentors and Protégés are able to openly share analysis of areas that be convalesced and celebrate gains. Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) noted that the key to a valuable mentor relationship is the development of reflective practices. Instead of providing answers to challenges, effective mentors ask questions that require reflecting (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Reflective conversations and questioning are the solution to some mentoring relationships where the protégé becomes too dependent on their mentor wanting regulatory resolutions to address their quandaries.

**Conclusion**

Encouraging leaders to be certain of the benefits of mentoring should not be a difficult task, especially for school leaders. Principals and superintendents usually assign novice teachers a mentor to assist with their transition to provide a safety net of support in their early years as an educator. By doing this, they are showing that they understand the power of interpersonal
relationships in building a successful teacher. Kram (1983) reasoned that role modeling, counseling, friendship, coaching, sponsorship a mentoring relationship could enhance a person’s efficiency in their roles, boost confidence, and directly support career advancement. Knowing this, how can we get leaders to understand the importance of modeling continuing to seek learning opportunities through relationships? How can districts and universities collaborate to build successful mentorship programs and facilitate support networks to increase retention rate of leaders and recruit emerging leaders?

While this text reviewed mentoring in a holistic view, it would be thought-provoking to examine the context of mentoring further comparing the consistent effectiveness of informal versus formal mentoring in a school setting. The research shows that change happens through the power of relationships (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh 2001, 2004; Searby, 2010). By embedding coursework that uses mentorships to provide aspiring and novice school leaders with fundamental field experiences, it is hypothesized that school cultures will improve, teacher attrition rates will increase, and student achievement will proliferate.


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