

Mentoring in Early Childhood Settings: Elements of Effective Relationships

By Jennifer M. Longley and Jennifer M. Gilken



There is a reciprocal process between the mentor and the mentee

skills in student interns, volunteers, and early childhood professionals. Some teachers request or accept a student intern or volunteer with the idea that the person will simply provide extra help in their classroom; however, this perception underestimates the tremendous amount of influence mentors have in shaping the future of the profession. Mentees tend to use their mentors' practices more often than they use practices learned in other contexts, such as teacher preparation programs (Agbenyega, 2012).

Early childhood educators take on many roles over the course of their careers. One role is that of mentor. Although mentors serve a variety of functions, they primarily act as role models, facilitators, and collaborators (Kupila, Ukkonen-Mikkola, & Rantala, 2017). Mentors offer advice, guidance, counseling (Altes & Pinholster, 2013), support, and assistance. This arrangement can be formal, such as when it is organized through an organization, or informal, such as when a person asks someone with more experience to be their mentor. In early childhood education, mentoring can involve teachers working with volunteers, student interns, teacher's aides, assistant teachers, newer teachers, and/or experienced teachers. It is different from supervising, as mentors do not evaluate the person being mentored, the mentee (Walkington, 2005). There is a reciprocal process between the mentor and the mentee, as both grow during the mentoring process (Graves, 2010; Hobbs & Stovall, 2015; Kupila et al., 2017).

Mentors are critical as cultivators and sustainers of early childhood education. They strengthen the abilities of those in the field, as mentoring facilitates the development and refining of

In addition, mentoring in early childhood education builds capacity in both mentees and mentors. Mentoring often strengthens confidence, deepens a sense of belonging in the community, fosters identity in the field, and enhances the skill set of mentees. It also instills the importance of professional growth and development in mentees, often from their entry into the profession. Mentors frequently articulate the rationale for their practices; enhance interpersonal skills; refine their pedagogical techniques; and ensure that valued traditions, philosophies, and practices will continue. They also have an opportunity to give back to the profession (Kupila et al., 2017; Walkington, 2005).

This growth of mentor and mentee occurs in the context of their relationship, so the quality of the relationship is vital to the success of mentoring. This article outlines three components of an effective mentoring relationship in early childhood settings: 1) relationship-based practices, 2) communication, and 3) reflective practices. This is not a complete list of the ingredients for effective relationships; however, these are the essential, foundational elements needed to build and develop effective mentoring relationships in early childhood settings. Masterful early childhood teachers use these same skills to build relationships with young

children, families, and colleagues; therefore, it is essential for mentors to model these skills, embed them into their relationships with mentees, and assist mentees in developing these capacities. Mentors have a pivotal role in augmenting and improving the field by guiding and supporting those who work with, or plan to work with, young children and families.

Three Components of Effective Mentoring Relationships

Jorge, the volunteer grandparent assigned to Denise's preschool class, walked into the classroom for his second day of volunteering. When Denise saw Jorge, she said, "Hi, Jorge, I am happy to see you! Would you like to join the children in play?" Jorge smiled, saw some children in the block area building with a train set, then went over and sat with them.

When Jorge saw Shanay begin to struggle to connect the train tracks, Jorge extended his hand to Shanay and said, "Give me." Shanay put the tracks in Jorge's hand. Jorge proceeded to connect the tracks and lay them on the floor. He then looked up at Shanay and said, "Maybe you should go play with the girls in the kitchen so the boys will have more room to play with the trains." The philosophy in Denise's class was to discourage play based on gender stereotypes and to refrain from assisting children with problems until after they asked for help. Denise would be mentoring Jorge while he volunteered in her class. What would she do and say? How would she address these issues with Jorge?

Relationship-based Practices

The success or failure of mentoring is based on the relationship between mentor and mentee, as relationships are the basis of learning. Therefore, one of a mentor's crucial responsibilities is supporting mentees in developing the skills to form effective relationships with children, families, and colleagues. Mentors who use relationship-based practices help to foster and sustain their relationships with mentees, while enhancing the mentee's ability to use relationship-based practices in the classroom and with families. Because mentees may feel insecure, have less experience in the field, and/or be unsure of how to develop a mentoring relationship, the onus of creating a relationship lies with the mentor. Mentors should use the following relationship-based practices: building trust, partnering, using a strengths-based lens, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Trust is the cornerstone of the relationship between a mentor and mentee (Chu, 2012). Trust involves believing that another person is acting in your best interest, is reliable, and will be an ally. Building trust in mentoring relationships involves a mentor's getting to know a mentee while helping them to feel safe and secure in both the relationship and in their role in the classroom. Denise, from the opening vignette to this section, could have worked to develop trust with Jorge by choosing to think about how to speak with him later, rather than correcting him in the moment, when she observed him talking to children in a manner inconsistent with the program's philosophy.

In addition to building trust, effective mentors create partnerships with mentees. A partnership recognizes that all of the parties involved have skills, knowledge, and expertise to share. Mentors frequently appreciate that children in a classroom can benefit from the communication styles, insights (Walkington, 2005), and abilities mentees bring. Mentors are often considered to hold a position of power over mentees (Hobb & Stovall, 2015; Loizou, 2011), as they have more experience in the field and frequently help mentees on their career paths by writing letters of recommendations and/or making professional connections. Yet an effective mentor understands that although they may have more teaching experience, relinquishing their role as the expert and the gatekeeper of information allows both to learn. This role release on the part of the mentor often leads to a shift in the dynamics in the mentoring relationship, enabling the mentor and mentee to be equal partners. After mentees have the ability to form partnerships, they can, in turn, partner effectively with families and coworkers.

As part of building a trusting partnership, mentors identify a mentee's strengths and use those assets to help a mentee grow. A strengths-based lens focuses on the qualities and characteristics, such as previous experience and talents, a mentee brings to a situation, rather than emphasizing their weaknesses or deficits. Just as teachers do, mentees bring their backgrounds, talents, and wealth of knowledge from their heritage culture to the classroom. Capitalizing on mentees' experience and expertise strengthens their self-esteem, benefits the classroom, and provides a framework the mentees can use in the workplace with children, families, and peers. Using a strengths-based lens, Denise from the first vignette would have seen Jorge sitting on the floor with the children, engaging in their play, and developing a good rapport with them, rather than just focusing on what Jorge could have done differently.

Focusing on mentees' abilities can foster their sense of belonging. Mentors also work in other ways to foster mentees' sense of belonging in the classroom, program, and profession. These efforts involve socializing mentees to the field (Walkington, 2005), program expectations, and classroom customs, which enables them to join the community and supports the development of their professional identity. Mentees who see themselves as members of the community will be more invested in the community, its well-being, and its members. Professional socialization can include assisting a mentee in developing connections to the field (Brown-DuPaul, Davis, & Wursta, 2013), creating a network of professional contacts, and becoming involved in professional organizations and activities. Although acclimating to the field is always important, how and to what extent each person is socialized to the profession depends on their role; for example, volunteers do not have the same professional belonging needs as professionals or future professionals. To foster Jorge's sense of belonging at the center, Denise would have taken him for a tour, introduced him to all of the staff and other grandparent volunteers, and made him aware of upcoming events. Relationship-based practices that foster a sense of belonging, use a strengths-based lens, nurture partnerships, and build trust are foundational to positive mentoring relationships.

Communication

As the children napped, Denise and Jorge sat down for their weekly meeting. Denise started by saying, "On Monday, when the children were playing, you joined them in playing with the shaving cream! I was surprised because last week you mentioned you didn't understand the purpose of open-ended sensory play." Jorge shrugged and replied, "I thought about our talk and then watched DeShawn paint. First, he painted on paper, then his hands and arms, next the table, and then the floor. Every time he painted on something, he watched the paint closely. He watched the brush as it moved, too. Watching him made me realize that children learn from their senses." Denise continued, "I hear that you closely observed DeShawn painting and noticed how he used the information from his senses. Generally, how do you think everything is going this week? What would you like to talk about today?" Jorge paused for a moment. "There is something I've been meaning to ask: Why don't we have the kids line up? Like when they go to the bathroom, or to go outside? Sometimes they seem to go in a herd; where is the order?"

Communication is an essential element in successful mentoring (Graves, 2010). The aspects of communication that contribute to an effective mentoring relationship include open communication, clear expectations, active listening, formal meetings, and communication with the mentee's agency. As with relationship-based practices, the mentor has the responsibility to initiate and set the tone for the communication. Mentors introduce or reaffirm to mentees the acceptable and appropriate interaction styles used in early childhood settings, and mentees then can use their communication skills with others in the field.

Communication between a mentor and a mentee should be open, enabling both parties to exchange ideas (Walkington, 2005). Mentees should feel comfortable bringing up issues and questions, and to do this they must know they will receive support and guidance. When mentees are comfortable in relationships that promote open communication, they can later develop relationships using open communication with others. In the vignette to this section, Jorge felt comfortable asking Denise questions about classroom practices because Denise created an environment in which Jorge's questions were welcomed.

One aspect of open communication is clear expectations. When



Good conversations support communication

both the mentee and mentor articulate their expectations at the outset, both tend to view the relationship as positive and supportive (Graves, 2010; Loizou, 2011). Expectations and protocols should be shared verbally and in writing to ensure that mentees are aware of their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, sharing routines and practices, such as where to store personal belongings, how transitions flow, and what to expect during activities, helps to integrate mentees into a program. This is a model for how mentees can interact with young children, families, and colleagues in their future early childhood work.

Active listening is also a vital skill for mentors when they communicate with mentees. An active listener not only hears what a person is saying but also stops and paraphrases back the speaker's message. In other words, mentors should be a sounding board for mentees (Brown-DuPaul et al., 2013). Although they frequently have key information to share, it is also important for them to listen and respond. In the second scenario, Denise demonstrated active listening by rephrasing Jorge's experience of observing DeShawn's painting. Active listening is especially useful during formal meetings between mentors and mentees, and it is also a skill that mentees can learn to use with young children, families, and coworkers.

Formal meetings are particularly useful for fostering communication because they provide mentors and mentees with specific times to meet and talk in a quiet, private space apart from the routine of the day. These meetings are a crucial component of the mentoring process (Graves, 2010) and should occur regularly. The meetings should begin with specific examples of what the mentee has done well, and then the mentee should identify

what they would like to address. These meetings facilitate mentees in developing the skills they may later use in team meetings, meetings with families, and in following the lead of a child. In the vignette above, Denise demonstrated these practices when she met with Jorge. She started the conversation by noting changes in Jorge's behavior related to a previous discussion. Then Denise let Jorge guide the discussion by posing questions to address in the meeting. If Jorge did not have any questions, Denise could have observed the children and asked Jorge for his insights. Chu (2012) offers a model of using inquiry and research as a method to support mentees' growth and development.

In formal mentoring situations, communication between mentees and mentors should not be limited to one-on-one meetings, but, rather, should also regularly include the agency or person who matched the mentee with the mentor (Baum & Korth, 2013; Walkington, 2005). The communication between the mentee, mentor, and agency liaison can be viewed as a triangle. In a situation like Denise and Jorge's, the liaison from the grandparent volunteer agency should be given routine updates regarding the volunteer's work. If a significant problem arises, the teacher and/or the volunteer could reach out to the agency liaison for support. Ensuring there are regular meeting times that promote open, clear communication with active listening creates fertile ground for both the mentor and mentee to fully participate in the mentoring relationship.

Reflective Practices

One day when Jorge was volunteering, DeShawn and Shanay were playing in the dramatic play kitchen. As DeShawn cooked and Shanay got dressed, Denise walked over, asking Shanay, "Are you getting ready to go to work?" Shanay replied, "Yes, I am an engineer, and I have a briefcase," holding it up. Denise nodded, turning to DeShawn to inquire, "What are you cooking? It smells delicious!" DeShawn answered, "Pancakes and grits," as he stirred. "Yum," Denise continued as she sat on the floor. "Is that breakfast for you, Shanay, and the babies?" "Yup," DeShawn said, grabbing another pot and spoon from the cabinet, putting the pot on the stove, turning the knob for the burner, then stirring intently. "Are you staying home with the babies?" Denise asked, as DeShawn began gathering cups, plates, and utensils and setting the table.

Reflective practices are integral to both mentoring and working in early childhood settings. Reflective practices involve taking a moment to think about a situation, what happened, each person's actions and reactions, their possible motivations for their words and/or deeds, and the consequences. When early childhood professionals are able to reflect on their interactions with children, families, and peers in the workplace, they develop stronger relationships with them. Mentors who model reflective practices and embed reflectivity into their relationships with mentees assist mentees in developing the ability to be reflective. Because reflection is a vehicle for growth and development, mentors' use of reflective practices helps mentees make meaning from their experiences in early childhood settings (Altes & Pinholster, 2013). To facilitate the development of reflective

practices, mentors should recognize that mentees are always learning, reflect on their own practices, be empathic, and engage in self-care.

A mentor's modeling of reflective practices is particularly important in mentoring because those entering the field of early childhood education often have not yet developed reflective skills (Agbenyega, 2012). Being self-reflective is a process, based on the context of an interaction; it is a skill that can take years to develop. A mentor who asks open-ended questions in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner can help their mentee develop reflective skills (Chu, 2012). The goal is for mentees to develop the habit of asking open-ended questions about their work. At their first regularly scheduled meeting, Denise could have begun the discussion about non-gendered play in the classroom by asking Jorge, "How do you think Shanay felt when you suggested she go play in the kitchen?"

Effective mentors are aware that mentees enter with different skill sets, different experiences, and at different places on the learning continuum (Chu, 2012). Such mentors honor those differences while supporting each mentee on their individual path of growth and development. They provide opportunities for their mentees to observe new strategies, experiment with using pedagogical techniques, and reflect on the outcome in supportive environments. Mentors can encourage mentees to set goals for their learning and growth and then scaffold learning. Scaffolding learning can take various forms, including providing direct instruction on specific skills, such as what specific words to say in particular situations, or creating opportunities for mentees to develop their skills for the classroom. In the second scenario, Denise could have responded to Jorge's questions about lining up by explaining how expecting young children to wait is inappropriate and can lead to behavioral issues. After processing the concept with Jorge, she could have helped him identify activities for children faced with wait time, asking Jorge to lead one of the activities the next time a group of children had to wait.

In the process of teaching mentees about pedagogical practices, effective mentors also reflect on their practices. Denise became very cognizant of her actions and words around gender-stereotypical play after she observed Jorge's comment to Shanay in the opening vignette. This caused Denise to intentionally include statements about non-traditional gender roles in the classroom, as can be seen in the third vignette.

Because the learning process often exposes a person's vulnerabilities, empathy is also vital to a mentoring relationship. All early childhood professionals were once new to the field. Mentors who are able to put themselves into the shoes of their mentees, understanding the difficulties of developing one's identity in the field, will develop relationships that are more successful. Mentees who have experienced empathy are more likely to be empathic in their relationships with others. When Denise learned that this was Jorge's first experience volunteering in an early childhood classroom, she thought back to her experience volunteering, while in high school, in a classroom with very young children, and how supportive her mentor was. Denise realized

she should carefully and clearly guide Jorge through the process of getting to know the children, practices, and program, just as her mentor had done for her.

As a mentor works to create learning opportunities for, and be empathic towards, their mentee, they should remember to practice self-care as well. Mentors often don't feel prepared for or supported in their role (Baum & Korth, 2013; Hobbs & Stovall, 2015). Mentors should thus seek support from others and attend training when possible to develop the skills to be effective. The agency that placed a mentee can be a source of support by offering training and guidance. Ensuring that mentors engage in practices they find nurturing and rejuvenating helps to prevent their feeling overburdened. To use the above example, Denise might participate in an online support group for mentors of grandparent volunteers and go hiking on the weekends to rejuvenate.

Infusing self-reflectivity in the mentoring relationship involves mentors' recognizing that mentees are learning and mentors' reflecting on their own practices, being empathic, and attending to self-care. Although mentoring is a significant responsibility, it is also very rewarding. The first time Denise heard Jorge say, "Hitting DeShawn hurts his body," instead of his usual, "Don't hit DeShawn," Denise was both surprised and thrilled; she saw that her mentoring efforts were paying off.

Conclusion

Mentoring is a vital process in early childhood education. Mentors build and strengthen the field as they support volunteers, student teachers, new professionals, assistant teachers, teacher aides, and peers. They enhance the capacities and skills of mentees, who then can use these skills in their work, thus ensuring the continuation of quality programming in early childhood settings. Successful mentoring is dependent upon an effective relationship, which the mentor must take the initiative to build. Three elements are fundamental for effective mentoring relationships: 1) relationship-based practices, 2) communication, and 3) reflective practices. Masterful early childhood professionals need to develop these skills. When effective mentors model and embed these capacities into their relationships with mentees, both parties are likely to have a productive relationship, with the result that mentees will develop the skills necessary for successfully engaging with young children, families, and colleagues in early childhood settings.

Jennifer M. Longley, Ed.D., is a teacher, researcher, and community activist based in Yonkers, New York. She has worked with infants, toddlers, and families for over 20 years. Dr. Longley has the pleasure of teaching and learning from her students and colleagues as an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Borough of Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York. She has the privilege of serving on and collaborating with the diverse members of the Yonkers Basics Advisory Board, Yonkers Pride Foundation, and Yonkers Mayor Michael Spano's LGBTQ+ Advisory Board.

Jennifer M. Gilken, Ph.D., has worked in the field of early childhood for over 20 years. Dr. Gilken has been a teacher in Head Start and kindergarten, a director of a campus-based infant-toddler program, and an Assistant Professor. Currently, she has the privilege of working with preservice early childhood education students at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City. Her research interests include examining ways to support the infant-toddler workforce, STEM in early childhood education, and investigating methods that support students' feelings of belonging.

References

- Agbenyega, J. (2012). How we view our theoretical competency: Early childhood pre-service teachers' self-evaluation of a professional placement experience. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 37*(2), 141-147.
- Atles, J., & Pinholster, L. (2013). Student teaching: Reflections of a restless journey. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 34*, 308-319.
- Baum, A. C., & Korth, B. B. (2013). Preparing classroom teachers to be cooperating teachers: A report of current efforts, beliefs, challenges and associated recommendations. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 34*, 171-190.
- Brown-DuPaul, J., Davis, J. H., & Wursta, M. (2013). A high impact practice that works: Connecting mentors from the professional community to teacher education students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 37*(11), 807-815.
- Chu, M. (2010). Observe, reflect, and apply: Ways to successfully mentor early childhood educators. *Dimensions of Early Childhood Education, 40*(3), 20-28.
- Graves, S. (2010). Mentoring preservice teachers: A case study. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 35*(4), 14-20.
- Hobb, M. K., & Stovall, R. (2015). Supporting mentors of preservice early childhood education teachers: A literature review. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 36*, 90-99.
- Loizou, E. (2011). The diverse facets of power in early childhood mentor-student teacher relationships. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(4), 373-386.
- Walkington, J. (2005). Mentoring preservice teachers in the preschool setting: Perceptions of the role. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 30*(1), 28-35.