

Highlights of Educational Research on Leadership Mentoring: One and a half decades of Singapore experience

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Abstract

This purpose of this paper is to surface findings from a review of pertinent major research in Singapore and highlight the system-wide impact of in-service leadership mentoring over a sustained period of time. Beyond the transmission of knowledge and experience, sustained leadership mentoring generates a pervasive network to create learning in the development of aspiring school principals. Findings also reveal that protégés appreciate the role-modeling of their mentor principal in relation to service in leadership and the facilitation of learning. The nurturing and consolidation of relationships in mentoring actively promote interactions among peers in educational administration and leadership. The impact of leadership mentoring on the education system in influencing school leaders is substantial, over and beyond the period of its structured implementation.

Keywords School leadership development, Mentoring, Education, Singapore

Introduction

In Singapore, school leadership development programs have evolved with time. Though there were numerous program reviews and modifications in its history, there were only two significant program changes during the 24-year period from 1984 to 2007. From 1984 to 2000, a full-time program of one academic year duration, termed Diploma in Educational Administration (DEA), served to formally prepare promising vice-principals of Singapore for principalship. DEA was replaced by the Leaders in Education Program (LEP) with effect from 2001, and aspiring Singapore principals attended the latter on a full-time basis for six months. The former adopted a structured and system-wide incorporation of mentoring. This paper focuses on the highlights of previous research on mentoring that spanned 17 years in the Singapore education system, inclusive of findings gathered from a recent exploratory study undertaken by the author. All major writings undertaken by local faculty staff and visiting professors in the field of mentoring for

Singapore school leadership were studied and seven publications representative of highlights were cited.

Relevant Background on the Incorporation of Structured Mentoring

Mentoring can be implemented at the pre-service preparation level to assist aspiring school leaders. It can also be part of professional induction for beginning school leaders new on the job or be designed for in-service future school leaders. In Singapore, mentoring was the key feature of a school leadership development strategy for aspiring principals attending the DEA program at the National Institute of Education (NIE) of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) (Chong, Low, & Walker, 1989; Marquardt & Engel, 1993). The DEA program integrated mentoring with formal instruction provided by NIE faculty members. The staff also facilitated the eight-week school attachment component which was divided into two periods of four weeks each. During the school attachment, each of the DEA participants was paired with a school principal who served as a mentor to the participant. The mentor provided opportunities for the participant protégé to practice and gain experience on aspects pertaining to the “real-life” principal's work during the school attachment. Towards the end of the attachment, each protégé was given the opportunity to assume the executive responsibilities of the principal in the mentor's school for a week. The mentors were carefully selected by the Ministry of Education as worthy role models for aspiring school principals in Singapore, based on their ability to lead schools as evaluated by their reporting officers and countersigning officers. As such, there was involvement of schools, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education in repeated annual cycles of school leadership development. This was sustained over a period of more than one and a half decades, from around the mid-eighties to the twenty-first century, in the history of the Singapore education system.

Singapore System-wide Leadership Mentoring

In a comparative research on mentoring, Coleman, Low, Bush and Chew (1996) highlighted a relevant contrast between mentoring in England and Singapore. The mentoring scheme for new headteachers in England was not instituted on a system-wide basis unlike that of the mentoring program for aspiring principals in Singapore. While the English mentors did not significantly discern a wider perspective beyond benefits for the individuals involved, Singapore mentors noted that the education system benefited by having more effective principals for the future.

Singapore mentors also associated mentoring with the four descriptors of “peer support”, “collaboration”, “mutual/reciprocal learning” and “coaching” (Coleman et al., 1996). In the study, the mentors were requested to evaluate the appropriateness of given terms in a list. Such descriptors indicate that collaborative learning behavior could emerge among school principals in Singapore as a consequence of the mentoring program in the educational system (Chong, 1991; Walker, Chong, & Low, 1993). This is elaborated below.

In a study by Chong (1991), ninety-seven percent of the DEA mentors surveyed replied in the affirmative when they were asked whether the Singapore Educational System as a whole has benefited from the mentor/protégé program. The emerging collaborative learning behavior of school principals could be illustrated by the following five characteristics. Firstly, principals could learn from their experience and also learn through interaction with their other fellow principals, as well as through formal training programs conducted by their seniors. Secondly, principals could be involved in the development of future principals. Thirdly, the principals could work with their peers in mutual support for the effective management of schools. Fourthly, principals could continue to improve their professional status by the image they project. Lastly, principals could demonstrate the practice of theory in complementing the contributions of management educators. The underlying theme of these characteristics is collaborative behavior, with a strong emphasis on learning or helping others to learn. Mentors in Singapore expected that the mentoring program could lead to restructuring of school management in the Singapore education system, giving an emerging network structure of school management. Collaborative learning behavior appeared to be an obvious benefit to the Singapore educational system, and many mentors and protégés kept in contact with one another after their interaction in formal mentoring. Such collaborative learning behavior was similarly reported by Walker et al. (1993).

Development Phases and Practice of Leading

Five phases for the development of the mentor-protégé relationship have been identified in a study by Walker et al. (1993): formal, cautious, sharing, open, and beyond phases. This finding is obtained through triangulation of data collected through questionnaire, interviews and self-reports. The phases are not distinctly discrete and are meant to be perceived as a continuum with overlaps as the mentoring relationship progressed. The formal phase includes descriptors like performing routine tasks and feeling uncertain and apprehensive. In the cautious phase, trust becomes more apparent and there is more latitude in task selection. The sharing and open phases are marked by increasing trust and confidence between mentor and protégé. Frank exchanges are evident in the sharing phase, and descriptors for the open phase include “equal professional discussions” and “reciprocity recognized” (p. 40) as the relationship deepens. The final beyond phase involves open professional discussions between mentor and protégé in friendship contacts maintained on their own initiatives even after the termination of the formal school attachment.

The phases identified in Singapore are similar to those reported by studies done elsewhere, for instance, entry, mutual building of trust, risk taking, teaching of skills, professional standards and dissolution phases (Bova and Phillips, 1984); initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition phases (Kram, 1985); telling, role-modelling, mutual participation, delegation and self-direction phases (Gray and Gray, 1985). Distinct from these other models, the concepts of friendship and mutual learning or learning from one

another for mutual benefit are explicit features of the Singapore model of mentoring. Walker et al. (1993) reported that the mentors and protégés in Singapore felt as if they had become friends and mutual trust seemed to exist in the open and beyond phases. One could postulate that the beyond phase of the mentor-protégé relationship was likely to operate in the wider collegial network after the formal mentoring program. Many protégés felt that they had been accepted into a network that was extremely difficult for them to enter before their mentoring attachment (Walker et al, 1993). Chong et al (1989) cited a protégé: “I feel I can safely approach her at any time in the future for help and advice. You can say that we have struck up a friendship”. Expressions from mentors (Coleman et al, 1996) include the following: “Protégé was more forthcoming with ideas/suggestions and was also more open. We became good friends” and “I have made some life-long friends - not only for the school attachment period but for life”. As such, friendship and mutual learning surfaced prominently with regard to leadership mentoring in Singapore.

Further, the practice of leading primarily through relating with people emerged as the key aspect of learning from mentoring in a research by Lim (2005). Other aspects of school management learned and put into practice include monitoring, training and developing staff, planning and organizing administrative tasks, and relating to the external environment (for instance, general public, press and parents). In Lim’s study, a random sample of 70 per cent of the population of 68 secondary school principals was invited to participate. The response rate of participation was 85 per cent. Two methods of administering data collection were adopted, namely, the self-administered questionnaire and the interview. Former protégés who later became principals themselves after the mentoring experience indicated that the focus on leading through relating with people promoted the perception that people’s interests were valued. The following exemplify their quotes: “I was too task-oriented... when I was attached to this mentor... that helped to put myself in a better balance... that if you approach the staff or even the pupils, in a more people-centred way, you can also get things done, and you can get it done, well, as effectively and as efficiently too.” (Lim, 2005, pp. 32 & 33); “You want to establish trust, you must make sure that you are helping... you have to act what you believe, what you say. Say what you believe, act what you say. Saying is not important, you have to supplement or complement with action” (p. 34); “If you are able to show care and concern for the teachers, I think somehow this would also rub on to the teachers, that they must show care and concern to their pupils, you see... the head must take the lead... so it can filter down or permeate or percolate, so to speak.” (p. 36). The mentoring experience offered these former protégés the chance to learn from established mentors the art and heart of relating with people actively, promoting trust in relating with people as well as serving as worthy models in dedication to the education service.

Pervasive Network to Create Learning

The mentor-protégé developmental relationship and its associated features of friendship, collaboration and mutual learning were discussed earlier. Findings of research in Singapore by Lim (2005) also revealed that learning relationships cultivated by school principals at work have the same features. The principals formed learning relationships at work with other ‘fellow principals’. While meeting together could be an expression of learning relationships at work, other expressions included having meals together, clarifying doubts over the telephone, seeking opinions, and going on outings or educational visits together. There was active promotion of learning through sharing with peers at personal and professional levels among the principals.

Features of friendship, collaboration and mutual learning surfaced in the learning relationships formed by principals at work. The DEA program emerged as a rich source for the initiation and development of relationships that promoted informal learning professionally. The completion of the protégés’ roles as students of the mentoring program signaled the beginning of learning relationships at work. The new principals did not confine themselves to contacts within the original group of classmates. They seized opportunities to improve their practice of school management through learning from informal unstructured learning relationships at work.

Continual Workplace Learning with Evolving Change

The learning relationships at work among principals provide continual learning that empowers the principals to contribute individually and with peers towards more perceptive practice in education. The ever expanding corpus of information that pertains to the nature of school head learners requires the principals to learn how to learn. The diversity, volume and pace of current information that could be exchanged could be timely in the practice of school leadership. Such learning relationships facilitate the on-time delivery of pertinent knowledge in the exchange of information and the need for continual learning. Marquardt (1996, p. 107) has stated that in mentoring, the “ownership of the learning” lies with the “learner”. Continual workplace learning promotes self-management of the learning in the context of necessity for ongoing learning.

Such continual workplace learning helps principals cope or adapt to evolving change. The learning relationships at work help principals face the demands and ambiguities that accompanied their daily work. The network serves as a possible platform for principals to present issues, seek clarification and discuss practices, share problems without fear of penalties or worry about inadequacies. The principals tap on one another’s strengths to maximize their own potential individually or as part of a team in the workplace.

The ability of responding or even creating change positively necessitates selective thinking and moving beyond established norms. The concerns that mentoring may not be contributing to critical reflective leadership but passing on conservative role assumptions and practices (for example, Southworth, 1995) could not be substantiated in Singapore as findings of research reveal otherwise. This is similarly so for Daresh (1995, p. 14), who had suggested future studies on mentoring to ascertain the use of “traditional apprentice models (‘this is what I always do, so you should do the same’) as ideals for the behaviour of experienced administrators who work with students of educational leadership”. The Singapore research reveals that the vast majority of protégés discern aspects of their learning through mentoring that can be practiced in their contexts. The risk of developing too great a reliance on their learning from their mentors in their practice does not surface and there is no evidence of potential harm to development as a result of over-dependence on mentors. The research shows that the protégés recognize that they have to examine what they had learned. In a way, the protégés practice “organized abandonment” in management innovation, considering that “innovation means abandoning the old” (Drucker, 1992, pp. 339 & 340). They abandon what they perceive as inappropriate practices in their changing contexts.

Daresh (1995, p.14) asserted that “the primary rationale for making use of mentoring for the professional development of educational leaders is grounded in the assumption that the role of the leader is a lonely effort, and that having the ability to relate to peers concerning personal and professional concerns is a way to reduce that sense of isolation”. Further, findings by Bush and Coleman (1995) indicate that mentoring could reduce professional isolation, provide developmental support and enhance confidence to new heads during a period of change and uncertainty. Both references presented above specifically surface the concern to minimize professional isolation among principals. Continual workplace learning relationships as surfaced in Singapore research shifts the centre of gravity from prevention of isolation to learning- learning for the future and of the future that evolves with change.

Serving and Leading Beyond the Confines of Role and Transaction

The learning relationships that nurture the mentor-protégé pair resurface in recent interviews in a pilot study involving six LEP steward principals. Half of these participants are former protégés of the Singapore mentoring program. The following quotations exemplify their voice as established principals who graduated from the Singapore leadership program seven to eight years ago and have today taken on the role of guiding the next generation of principals:

[The] mentor would discuss aspects of leadership and also what we [the protégés] want to learn with us. We were literally shadowing the [mentor] principals... got to know the p [mentor principal] pretty well because we interacted all the time... For me, I am now mentoring a first year principal, it’s very enriching because [the] process of mentoring is two-way... we are engaged in conversation...

Mentoring program provided me...to make own assessment of the principal's effectiveness based on his leadership style. Until today, I still find my attachment (to her mentor's school as part of the mentoring program) very useful."

For me I feel that I see as part of my contribution back to education, in helping to develop more school leaders. I think giving time, being willing to open avenues, opportunities for the participant to learn about school and to see how this person can actually contribute... I see it as I have benefited from my past experience, again I see it as giving back. Given this area of work—why not? And I should give back. Part and parcel of building this body of professionals, because how can they learn? My mentor during my DEA attachment worked very hard and opened my perspectives.

The DEA and LEP have different emphasis in school leadership preparation. The role of the DEA mentoring principal is to "provide opportunities for the DEA participants to work with them through observation, role-modelling and participation in their work" (Diploma In Educational Administration School Attachment Handbook, 1997, p.10). In DEA mentoring, executive skills encompassed the following: human relations, perceptual, leadership, assertiveness, organizing, imaging, problem analysis, verbal communication, written communication and team building skills (pp. 33 & 34). It is required that the mentoring principals "share with the participant the large and small, the routine and unexpected decisions related to school management" (p.10). On the other hand, the role of the LEP steward principal is that of "investing" in the aspiring principal's "development in innovation" project in the steward principals' school as the participant "should produce marketable results for the school" (LEP, 2006, p.7).

Preliminary findings from the recent pilot study appear to suggest that steward principals who had the opportunity to learn from mentors in the former DEA program appear to espouse the intrinsic value of mentoring in education and are willing to serve and lead the next generation beyond the confines of role and transaction. Their expressions feature aspects pertaining to the notion that mentoring is an unselfish process (Appelbaum et al., 1994; Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Okawa, 2002). "Educare", the Latin word for education, denotes leading the potential within the learner. Such notion contradicts tangible utility value of instrumental transaction in education. The pilot study seems to indicate that former mentors in Singapore could have immense influential potential on their protégés in the art and heart of service in leadership when these protégés next receive the baton to facilitate the education of future principals.

Concluding remarks

Sustained over a period of more than 15 years, structured mentoring in Singapore for aspiring principals offered a rich setting and background for research on mentoring. Practice and policy implications could include a review of current school leadership

development programme to ride on the strengths of structured mentoring in DEA to complement the emphasis on innovation in informal guidance as practiced in LEP. The existing practice of individual-initiated, informal and unstructured style of guidance in school leadership development programme appears yet to fully maximize the potential of current high performing school leaders in developing the next generation of future school leaders. The research findings suggest that learning relationships formed in structured mentoring help in the development of creative ways to anticipate or create change, as the principals continually relate and learn with one another. It has been reported that the participant protégés presented case studies of incidents in the mentor's schools during review meetings organized by the facilitators of the program, and "through these presentations they learnt how different school leaders worked and how the various mentors tackled problems in innovative ways" (Low, 2001, p. 33).

As policies in Singapore focus more and more on innovation to thrive beyond survival, there is a need to illuminate the fact that there has been no local research evidence to prove that mentors are not innovative and their protégés are denied opportunities to learn innovatively. Mentoring could surface as a means for the encouragement of innovative ways of leading schools by principals through the pervasive network of learning relationships in the education system. As such, system-wide incorporation of structured mentoring in leadership development coupled with a focus on innovative practices could generate behavioral norm of leadership practice that encourages the continual creation of learning. As university faculty members continue to facilitate in the evolution of school leadership preparatory programmes in Singapore, further research could be conducted to ascertain the impact on learning from DEA-trained steward principals in contrast to learning from LEP-trained steward principals. Future research could also explore in depth the learning and practice of intangible leadership values like service beyond the confines of role and transaction, as well as courage and integrity in leadership mentoring.

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