



EFFECTIVE MENTORING

**Developing Stronger Teachers
and Future Leaders**



**Growing and
Nurturing Educators**

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring can play a key role in the growth of educators, especially when navigating periods of change. This might include those in the early years of their career, assuming leadership responsibilities for the first time, or taking on the role of school principal. When mentoring is approached holistically, it supports both mentors and mentees to flourish and achieve their professional and personal goals. Engaging in the process can also nurture the development of additional leadership skills and contribute to greater job satisfaction. Effective mentoring programs can help schools to elevate teacher morale, enhance teacher retention, and consequently reduce recruitment costs.

DEFINITIONS

Coaching and mentoring...are typically intended to foster personal and professional growth and to support people to be better at what they do.

(Hobson & Nieuwerburg, 2021, p.4)

Ragins and Kram (2007) separate the mentor role into career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions involve helping novice mentees to learn on the job and facilitating experienced mentees in their career advancement. Psychosocial functions include a focus on the mentee's self-efficacy and professional identity through trust and emotional support. The research findings revealed that coaching was typically described as assisting individuals in reaching their own decisions or solutions, while mentoring involves the provision of advice or solutions by experienced people to a novice (Ragins & Kram, 2007). However, the lines between mentoring and coaching can blur, depending upon the approach taken. Some mentoring is less about providing one-way advice and more about collaborative discussion, and some coaching is more directive in style.

These different perspectives may be explained through a proposal by Burger et al. (2021) that mentoring is either transmission oriented or constructivist oriented. The transmission approach involves the transfer of information from an expert to a passive novice. The constructivist approach is a more collaborative effort between the mentor and mentee, respecting the mentee's need for autonomy. In this article, mentoring is seen as constructivist and occurring in a collaborative partnership focusing on both career and psychosocial aspects, not just classroom practice.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Mentoring relationships work best when they occur within a supportive community (Goodwin et al., 2021; Mosley et al., 2022; Shanks et al., 2022) that has a strong sense of collegiality (Ben-David & Berkovich, 2020; Gul et al., 2019). There are a number of conditions schools can provide to assist mentors in their roles:

- a formal structure for mentoring (Hightower et al., 2020)
- specify clear roles of the mentor and mentee (Burger et al., 2021)
- support for the process provided by leadership (Gul et al., 2019)
- match mentors and mentees from similar fields (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Maready et al., 2021)
- release mentors from some teaching time (Maready et al., 2021).

Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found schools that provide strong mentoring programs have reduced teacher turnover rates.

MENTORS AS LEADERS

Schools can demonstrate the value they place on mentorship by viewing it as a leadership role, or at least a step towards leadership (Gul et al., 2019; Hightower et al., 2020). According to Gul et al. (2019), as mentors reflect upon their practice to articulate their knowledge, they gain greater awareness of their expertise which can help build confidence in their leadership abilities. Even without a leadership label, being a mentor can lead to professional growth and be an enriching experience (Goodwin et al., 2021).

ROLE OF THE MENTOR

The mentor-mentee learning is a bilateral process.

(Gul et al., 2019, p.218)

At its core, mentorship requires collegiality, community and trust, demanding mentors to exhibit effective communication skills, empathy and forethought.

Burger et al. (2021) suggest mentors need to:

- possess communication skills that include reflective practices
- be aware of mentees' perspectives, not merely provide solutions
- employ non-controlling language
- engage in dialogue as co-thinkers – collaborate, not evaluate.

However, Izadinia's (2016) study found that mentors and mentees can have different perspectives regarding the type of communication that should occur. Mentors believed delivering feedback about the realities of teaching was their main role, whereas mentees also wanted mentors to provide emotional support and encouragement to lift their confidence. It is therefore important for mentors to provide a balance of feedback and support, according to their mentee's needs.

To be a bilateral process, the mentoring process acts as a learning partnership where both the mentor and mentee are co-inquirers (Larsen, Nguyen, Curtis & Loughland, 2023). This means that questions should not be only going in one direction, with the mentor running the conversation like an interview, or the mentee asking an expert for sage advice. Instead, it should be bidirectional with questions that are authentic and generative in a non-hierarchical and mutually respectful relationship (Larsen, Nguyen, Curtis & Loughland, 2023). As such, it is vital that the mentor approach the interaction with genuine curiosity, also seeking to learn it.

There are many aspects to mentoring that require forethought and diligence. For instance, a mentor requires commitment to the role and recognition that they are carrying out and representing the school's philosophy and culture (Jonson, 2008). Effective mentors schedule time for discussion (Mosley et al., 2022), preferably at the end of the school day when teachers are less distracted by other school needs (Betlem et al., 2019).

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Tacit knowledge about teaching has to be made visible.

(Gul et al., 2019, p. 223)

The mentor is an integral part of the nexus between theory and practice (Betlem et al., 2019; Mosley et al., 2022). Technical or instructional support and feedback about classroom practice is the basis of most mentoring in education.

Classroom practice includes:

- lesson planning and assessment setting
- managing and engaging classes
- creating a safe learning environment.

Larsen, Curtis, Nguyen & Loughland (2023) recommend that mentoring is separated from the regulatory ‘tick-box’ role of helping early career educators to provide evidence of meeting Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). However, in recognition of what is practically attainable in a time-poor profession, they propose a balance be determined between mentoring and regulatory duties. At the very least, the mentoring process needs to avoid being “rooted in judgment” which can lead to conflict (Larsen, Jensen-Clayton, Curtis, Loughland & Nguyen, 2023, p. 4). It is also critical to ensure the mentoring process is not limited by the APST but is encompassing of an ever-changing complex profession and the learners within it (Larsen, Curtis, Nguyen & Loughland, 2023).

The following approaches assist mentees with developing their knowledge, understanding and skills in classroom practice:

- purposeful and frequent meetings to recognise improvement (Maready et al., 2021)
- mentees’ observations of effective teachers (Hobbs & Putnam, 2016)
- reflection and discussions about teaching practices by both mentor and mentee (Maready et al., 2021; Shanks et al., 2022)
- problem solving through reflective practice (Mosley et al., 2022)
- guiding mentee reflection through questioning (Shanks et al., 2022)
- sharing (not prescribing) strategies according to the mentee’s needs (Gul et al., 2019; Hobbs & Putnam, 2016; Maready et al., 2021)
- constructive feedback in collaborative dialogue, without being authoritative (Hightower et al., 2020; Hobbs & Putnam, 2016).

Mentorship that focuses on classroom practice improves mentees’ self-efficacy (Hightower et al., 2020), so they feel more capable in the role of teacher (Burger et al., 2021).

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Mentoring, when done right, can stabilise the shifting ground on which new teachers try to stand.

(Kardos & Johnson 2010, p. 24)

Clear and frequent communication with the skills of active listening is key for creating a nurturing and supportive environment. To facilitate a bilateral mentoring process, Burger et al. (2021) proposed mentors would benefit from:

- possessing communication skills that include reflective practice
- being aware of mentees' perspectives, not merely providing solutions
- employing non-controlling language
- engaging in dialogue as co-thinkers.

They also suggest that mentors learn counselling techniques and help their mentees to connect with others in the school community. This can partly enhance social relatedness and a sense of belonging at the school. Goodwin et al. (2021) proposed that mentoring conversations should occur outside the built environment of the school, such as gardens and cafes, and possibly include art or music, to help recharge energy levels.

Mentors have a key role in developing teachers' job satisfaction (Burger et al., 2021; Hightower et al., 2020). Job satisfaction can be achieved by allowing mentees to have autonomy in their role (Burger et al., 2021) which enhances their self-reliance (Gul, et al., 2019) and sense of self (Gordon, 2008). The main concept is that the mentor empowers the mentee (Hobson & Nieuwerburg, 2021).

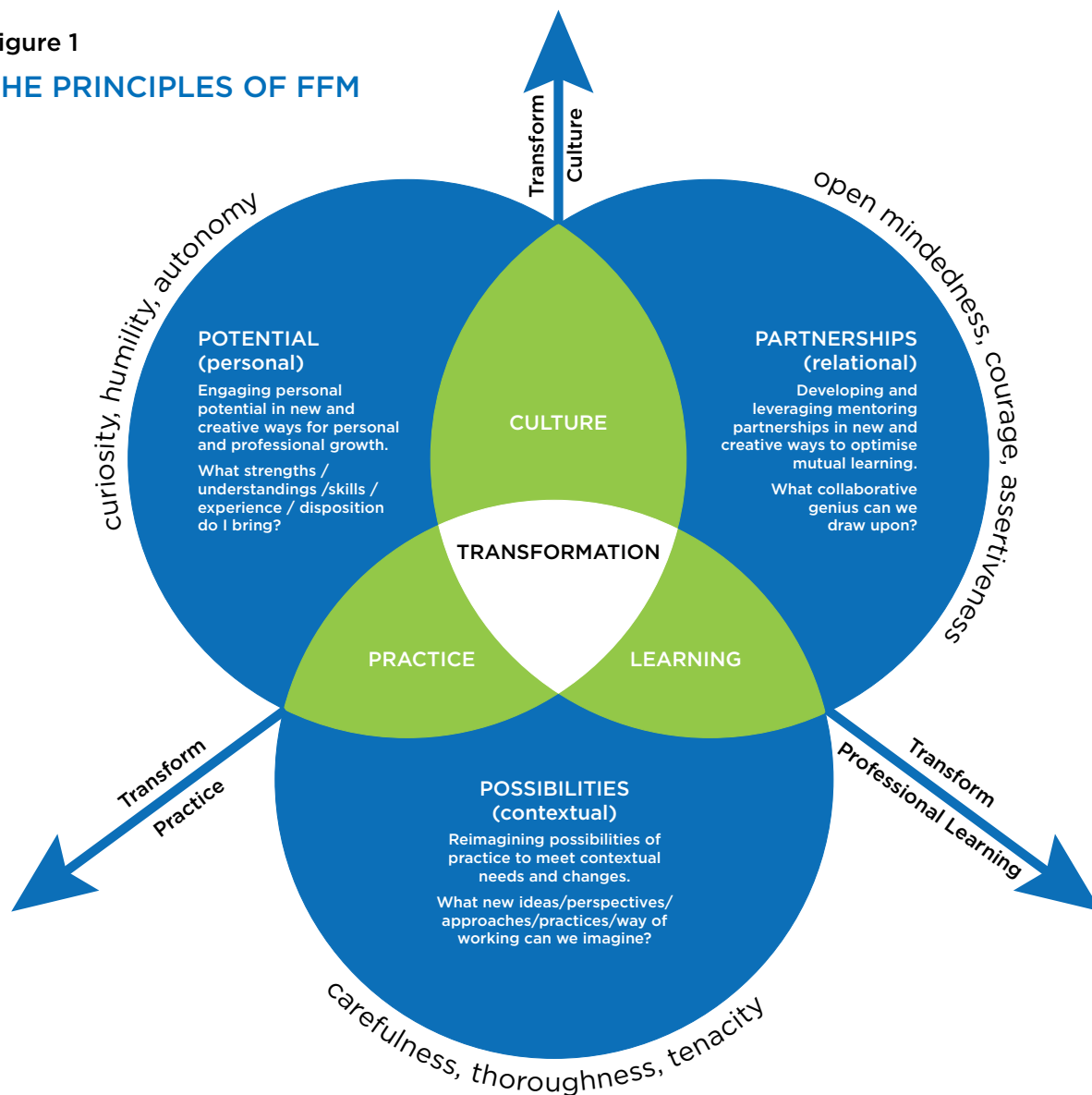
THE FUTURE-FOCUSED MENTORING MODEL (FfM)

To build the capacity of teachers to thrive under constant change and challenges, Larsen, Jensen-Clayton, Curtis, Loughland & Nguyen (2023) developed a model of mentoring (see Figure 1) that combines for both mentors and mentees:

- personal potential (e.g. self-belief and ways of working) through curiosity, humility and autonomy
- relational partnerships (e.g. embrace and be curious about each other's approaches, and collaboratively transform ways of working) through open-mindedness, courage and attentiveness
- contextual possibilities (e.g. consider the ways of working that exist and the possibilities for respectfully transforming the future) through carefulness, thoroughness and tenacity.

This model illustrates the complexities involved in the mentoring process and some of the various considerations for relationship building. It applies not only to early career educators, but to any mentoring process between teachers and leaders in the profession. Classroom and/or leadership practice is developed in a relational partnership and, emotional support is gained from respectfully recognising each other's personal potential. Additionally, this model looks to the future and how the mentoring relationship can help to build the school's culture, practice and learning for all.

Figure 1
THE PRINCIPLES OF FFM



Note: From “Re-imagining teacher mentoring for the future” by E. Larsen, C. Jensen-Clayton, E. Curtis, T. Loughland & H. T. M. Nguyen, 2023, *Professional Development in Education*, 1-15, p. 9. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2023.2178480>). Copyright 2023 by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

CONCLUSION

Effective mentoring requires mentors to provide a balance of instructional and emotional support as appropriate for the mentee whilst still enabling autonomy. The same applies when mentoring for leadership roles. The mentoring process encompasses a range of complexities but when both mentor and mentee respect it as a bilateral process, they may thrive. Mentoring processes can also help schools to evolve and build a better future.

To support schools with enhancing their mentoring processes, the Growing and Nurturing Educators initiative has developed a five hour self-paced learning experience **Being an Effective Mentor**.

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