CASS College of Alberta School Superintendents

Continuing Education Program

Research Report

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Mentorship Program Literature Review

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1 Introduction

This literature review on educational leadership mentorship is a result of a request from the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS). CASS has provided mentorship programming in a variety of forms to system education leaders since its inception. Most recently, through an act of Alberta's Legislative Assembly, CASS has achieved the status of a professional organization through the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act (2021) (CASS Act). As a result, CASS is developing a formal approach to the ongoing growth and learning of its membership. The current mentorship program is being reviewed and updated to align with the continuing education program requirements and general organizational needs of its members and school divisions across Alberta.

The review of literature is a necessary component for the ultimate development of current and relevant mentorship for system educational leaders. It is the foundation for a mentorship program of accredited system leaders with Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and/or the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) certification. This review of literature and proposed recommendations support the work of CASS as it serves education professionals throughout Alberta and beyond.

1.1 Outcomes of the Literature Review

The College of Alberta School Superintendents, as legislated professional organization, is required to achieve four objects as part of the CASS Act (2021), one of which is pertinent to this study and the mentorship program framework. The specific object is found in the CASS Act Section 5:

(b) to improve the teaching profession and leadership of the education system by

(i) developing and implementing continuing education programs and resources to improve the knowledge and skills of members,

(ii) carrying out research and publishing materials designed to maintain and improve the competence of members,

CASS has commissioned this work to provide the background research with the goal of enhancing current mentorship experiences through connection with the CASS Continuing Education Program (CEP) and to ensure that CASS as a professional organization engages in evidence informed practices.

1.2 Funding

A conditional grant from Alberta Education made this project possible. The funding allows CASS to align its mentorship practices with the latest research information related to educational leadership. A complete mentorship program will be developed in support of LQS and SLQS certificated members.

1.3 Scope of this Literature Review

The scope of this review, given the wide-ranging definitions of mentorship, is focused on educational leadership and mentorship from educational, psychological, philosophical, sociological, and business perspectives. An emphasis is placed upon Canadian sources, however, to ensure that the outcome of this review is achieved, international literature has also been accessed. An important contextual point of this review is a focus on applied research. Therefore, highly theoretical articles are cited; however, the implications for practice are a priority.

In addition, current CASS members participated in focus groups and interviews. The participants (8) were either mentors or mentees or protégés. The participants came from four of the five CASS zones and represented rural, urban, and rural/urban school divisions.

2 Review of Mentorship and Educational Leadership

Mentoring, as a concept, is widely defined, conceptualized, and implemented across a range of fields. Along with a traditional definition of mentorship, other defining features are emerging (Crow, 2012; Hall & Liva, 2021; Irby, 2020; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). In the specific area of educational leadership, several key features are pursued in this review, both through analysis of relevant literature and interviews and focus groups of individuals from Alberta school authorities practicing as mentors or pursuing mentorship as mentees. The scope of this review is narrow, examining mentorship in the realm of educational leadership in a school authority context and not specifically related to mentorship within schools with teachers or student teachers.

2.1 K-12 Mentorship Focus Group Participants

Understanding how focus group participants in the field of K-12 education in Alberta understand and practice mentorship is presented. Participants are superintendents, assistant superintendents and directors or managers of specific leadership areas within a school division. There were eight participants, and they were or are presently mentors or mentees. The focus group findings are categorized as activities, features, barriers, relationship to the CASS continuing education program, and advice to CASS. The findings are listed as the most common thematic actions or activities undertaken or supported by the participants.

Common Activities Related to Mentorship

- Regular and scheduled meetings using one or more of the following:
  - phone calls
  - virtual meetings
- site visits
- Available on quick notice (call or email)
- Visit each other's school division (when possible)

- Occasional social gathering
  - Most often at CASS conferences or at Zone meetings

Features of Effective Mentorship

- Establish regular meeting times:
  - Phone calls
  - Virtual meetings
  - Visits
- Establishing role alike mentorship is most valuable
- Participating in an initial kick-off meeting (to make introductions and clarify expectations)
- Establishing norms for meetings
- Having high level of commitment by each party
- Providing a generosity of time and expertise
- Commitment of CASS to the program
- Continuing professional relationships (beyond the formal mentorship program)

Barriers

- Time as a barrier due to the lack of it/ busyness
- Lack of commitment by one of the parties
- School division leadership does not want regulated members to take part in the CASS program
- When roles were not matched

Relationship to Continuing Education Program (CEP)

- Acknowledgement of time for CEP is important
- Do not over-program or over-structure mentorship
- Keep as open as possible
- Acknowledge the networking that occurs through professional opportunities and social networking

Advice

- Continue the program
- Host a face-to-face meeting
- Hold an initiating event or social gathering to connect with others
- Establish an accountability mechanism; particularly if connected to CEP

The participants willingly gave of their time to share information about their experiences. The list of topics and themes highlights positive experiences of the participants. Several barriers to a successful mentoring experience are mentioned, however, some of the items are beyond the control of CASS or the individuals involved. A willingness for some form of accountability in the mentorship program was evident.

Consistently throughout the meetings, participants commented on the relationship building that took place. They felt that it was a successful mentorship experience when the relationships continued after the formal mentorship program ended. The psycho-social aspect of the relationship was a significant finding.

Participants felt that they received much more than the necessary knowledge and skills they were looking for. They experienced a psychological and social benefit through the professional relationship that often extended well beyond the formal term of mentorship.

2.2 Definitions of Mentorship

Definitions and outcomes of mentorship are diverse. Definitions are highly contextual, meaning that the definitions depend upon the field in which it is used, the theoretical underpinnings that are used, and how mentorship is functionally enacted. In one article, over 50 definitions of mentorship have been identified (Crisp & Cruz, 2009) Despite these challenges, mentorship is practiced in many fields and is established in a framework according to its unique context (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Dawson, 2014; Lockwood et al., 2005; Searby & Brondyk, 2016). Practically, mentorship is straightforward and transactional. Expertise, knowledge and skill are shared with those who would benefit from such practices. Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) put it this way, “Whether traditional or progressive in nature, the mentoring relationship is long term and regulated, with feedback expected” (p. 31). On the other hand, mentorship raises questions about organizational culture and goals, culture shifting, and critiques of purely transactional relationships. What follows is a discussion of traditional mentoring and socially constructed mentoring, each of which have a place within a mentorship program within an organization that is both, conserving of long-established public institutions and being responsive to a dynamic and changing context.

2.2.1 Traditional Mentoring

On the surface, a mentoring program is a basic working relationship between two professionals as defined by Daresh and Playko (1994) who presented this definition to conference attendees:

> As we define it, mentoring is a continuing process wherein individuals within an organization provide support and guidance to others so that it may be possible for these individuals (often referred to as "protégés" or "mentees") to become more effective contributors to the goals of the organization. (p. 1)

Sambunjak et al. (2006) offer a similar description of traditional mentorship, where an experienced mentor collaborates with a novice mentee. While the practice of mentoring is relatively simple and has been in used in school jurisdictions for a very long time, more current nuances, critiques, and considerations have emerged. Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) identify traditional practices in mentorship, which include a(n):

- hierarchical relationship - usually a dyad or pair,
- experienced mentor supports a novice mentee, and
- focus on specific content and skill associated with a specific role.

Further, traditional mentorship reflects a transactional and instrumental professional relationship mostly focused on career placement or advancement (Crow, 2012; Daresh & Playko, 1994; Grocutt et al., 2022; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021).

The instrumental nature of mentorship is always present. Elements of mentoring, defined in a traditional way are still considered necessary for organizational health and development. It may be that there will always be an instrumental and transactional nature to mentorship, especially within school districts.

2.2.2 Constructivist Mentoring

Mentoring is difficult to define and does not have boundaries (Crow, 2012; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021), due to the fact that mentors encompass a variety of roles such as guide, coach, advisor, counsellor, therapist, or friend. This makes defining mentorship, as a concept, open-ended. Organizations and individuals may practice mentorship without actual boundaries. While definitions of mentorship abound, it is necessary for CASS to develop a working definition of mentorship and to suggest norms related to the purpose and practices within the professional mentorship relationship.

As stated, traditional mentorship offers a description of practices that hide the associated complexities of mentorship. More recent research brings to light some of the nuances and complexities of mentorship. Crow (2012) for example, raises a constructivist perspective of mentorship and leadership development. Key features of a constructivist approach are (Crow, 2012),

> *Put simply, a critical-constructivist perspective blends the understanding of learning as a co-constructed endeavor between mentor and protégé in which both are active participants with a critical activism in which this understanding is used to influence changes in the practice of leadership. (p. 7)*

An important focus of constructivist mentoring is the joint, active learning that the mentor and mentee engage in to achieve common goals. The learning and inquiry of mentors and mentees together are key features of this approach. The psycho-social element of personal growth and learning is also an important consideration. The emotional aspect of the mentoring experience is always present and may contribute to a successful mentorship experience when appropriately considered and supported, or it may lead to a difficult and possibly destructive experience.

2.2.3 Transformational Mentoring

Transformational mentorship (Hall & Liva, 2021) is closely linked to constructivist mentorship in that the focus is on learning and inquiry. Attention is paid to the mentee and their needs. This approach includes the expectation of transformation for the mentee. The mentee is profoundly changed because of the experience with a mentor in the context of learning together. While this research has been primarily focused on

graduate students, mentees felt that they experienced transformation while being students and learners.

Key features of transformational mentorship experience from the mentees' perceptions as adapted from (Hall & Liva, 2021) are:

- mentors are able to smooth the path for mentees,
- mentees advocate for themselves to forge a path forward,
- organizational structures promote mentoring, and
- mentees' hold aspirational goals. (p. 18)

Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) provide an additional metaphor that aligns with transformational mentoring. They state:

> Mentoring as living organism is an alternative metaphor for envisioning mentoring relationships as part of a complex social web and as dynamic configurations that transform and have the power to modernize norms and practices. (p. 24)

Alberta school district focus group participants shared experiences that were transformative in nature. In their own words they echoed how mentors helped smooth out work that was new to the mentee. While mentees had their own goals to achieve, the structure and support of mentorship was useful and often encouraging as they forged their own paths forward.

2.2.4 Peer mentoring

The concept of peer mentoring is relatively recent and often related to post-secondary and graduate students and the medical profession (DeForge et al., 2019; Kvernenes et al., 2021). Peer mentoring is most closely related to a constructivist approach, however the functional and transactional elements are an important part of this approach, as well. Mentoring helps participants achieve personal growth, but also career advancement. Key elements of peer mentoring require participants to work collectively to achieve personal and organizational goals. According to DeForge et al. (2019), peer mentor participants feel successful when the following conditions are present: availability and openness, respect and empathy, and reciprocity in peer mentorship. Barriers or conditions for failure occur when participants exhibit thanklessness, pretentiousness, an over-bearing demeanor, or adopt another participant's ideas as their own.

It is critical to note that DeForge et al. (2019) identify antecedent conditions for successful peer mentorship. Since peer mentors may work in dyads and there is no formal mentor, essential features for this approach include a) relationships that engender openness; b) common or shared goals; c) level power since peers are relatively similar in their situation; d) one member of the team being slightly ahead of the others. Additional features that enhance the mentorship experience, but are not essential, include a) friendship and trust; b) face-to-face interaction; c) group collaboration as part of a team to achieve common goals. When these antecedent conditions are met, there is a greater likelihood of a successful mentorship experience.

The concept of peer mentoring may be considered within a school jurisdiction or across jurisdictions when several similar positions are filled with relatively inexperienced individuals in a brief period. It may be that a one-to-one mentor/mentee relationship is not possible and that providing support to individuals in new positions is still required. Peer mentorship, carefully structured, may offer a solution.

2.2.4.1 wĕcihtotỲn

This Cree word and concept may be considered a subset of peer mentoring. wîcihtotân (weh-chee-tow-tan) (I*ndigenous Education and Walking Together | Alberta Teachers' Association, 2022)* is an indigenous program being piloted in Alberta with the support of the Alberta Teachers' Association. The program is a specific form of peer mentorship for Indigenous teachers and leaders within Alberta schools. The focus is on learning and listening together as peers. This is a mutually supportive community of learners where inquiring together addresses issues of isolation, marginalization and vulnerability. While this program is designed to support Indigenous teachers and leaders, it has applicability as a model to groups of people entering new leadership roles in their respective school divisions. The focus on inquiry, meaning-making and co-constructing supportive practices aligns with peer mentoring and constructivist mentoring.

3 Theoretical Perspectives

As has been stated, there are different definitions and theories about mentorship. Crisp and Cruz (2009) point out that a "theoretically valid model of mentoring" has not been identified (p. 238). To consider this more deeply, brief theoretical underpinnings are provided as part of this literature review. The intent is to examine mentorship theoretically within an educational leadership context. Mentorship, as a set of practices, is conceptually diverse in that multiple theories may be used to explain how it works and how it can be studied. Education, as a field, has been considered a form of pragmatism in practice (Stoller, 2017). Within schools and school jurisdictions, it may be that greater attention is paid to what works best under specific circumstances. To be clear, pragmatism is a theoretically based practice. As educators and as leaders we tend to behave within a context that the external world is independent of our knowledge and that it can be known through a process of observations, descriptions, and social discourse, but is distinct and separate from our own thoughts (Sayer, 1999). Extending Sayer's (1999) statement, the practice of inquiry is the way to see the world as outside of oneself that can be examined, manipulated and understood. This inquiry of the "external world" is a way to embody learning and act on it in practical and applied ways (Stoller, 2017). This appears to be a commonly held stance in education.

The "realist" conception of the world and knowledge is directly challenged by constructivist (Crow, 2012; Gergen, 2001) perspectives. In this view, knowledge is purely socially constructed and the external world, although acknowledged, has no

meaning without individuals assigning labels and descriptions to phenomena. In turn, the relationships among the phenomena are also examined with an emphasis on the meaning and power relations these phenomena have to each other and to the observers. A realist view of this situation would be to acknowledge external phenomena and indicate that the phenomena exist, quite apart from how one might interpret or construct the phenomena in one's mind. This is an important distinction because those who hold constructivist views tend to criticize realist views as focussed on end products and action and less on meaning and how one gets to an endpoint. Concretely, a constructivist mentor might ask questions to understand a mentees' professional context and what this means for the mentee. A mentee may raise a point of conflict with a colleague and the constructivist mentor would speak to the meaning of the situation and the power relations between the mentee and colleagues. A realist mentor might ask related questions of a mentee and when the mentee communicates a conflict situation, a realist mentor, less interested in the social construction of the situation, might ask about ways of moving past the conflict because the meaning of the conflict may not be as important as moving to concrete action.

This over-simplification of realism and social constructivism, in relation to mentorship, is intended to show that philosophical and theoretical underpinnings are rarely discussed since the results of actions taken by educators and leaders may be considered more relevant. Although the differences in realist and constructivist perspectives are significant and have an impact on how mentorship decisions are made and how mentorship is evaluated, teachers and leaders are focussed on that which works best for the specific situation and context. This means that a contextual analysis of a given situation that mentors and mentees are discussing may be viewed from a realist or constructivist perspective and that these become tools for identifying what should be done next. Selecting the theoretical underpinning to best suit the situation emphasizes a pragmatic and practical approach to mentorship.

4 Mentorship vs Coaching

In the K-12 education field, mentorship and coaching are sometimes considered as interchangeable terms. Within mentorship research, coaching is conceptually and practically different from mentoring. Mentoring is seen to be more long-term and career oriented, whereas coaching is considered to be short-term and specifically linked to performance or a particular set of skills or a project (Law, 2013). The distinctions between mentoring and coaching seem to be related to scope, where coaching may be a subset of mentoring (Crow, 2012; Law, 2013). For example, instructional coaching (Knight, 2011) and work of teachers and leaders has been discussed in education circles for over a decade. Coaching practices are still in need of refinement and support (Gill, 2019). Educational leadership mentoring, as proposed in this review, is focused on a longer term, career-long learning and advancement outcome, as well as reciprocal psycho-social outcomes. In this way mentoring is seen as constructivist and mutually supportive. Coaching can be more directive and

targeted, even though a coach is expected to be thoughtful, encouraging, and generative (Crow, 2012; Irby, 2020; Law, 2013).

5 Formal and Informal Mentorship

Much of the literature and the focus on this review is focused on formal, structured mentorship. Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) highlight the power of informal mentorship within organizations. School divisions and CASS have established mentorship programming with varying formality along with some anticipated outcomes. An important feature of formal mentorship relates to an organizing body or individual who arranges to bring mentors and mentees together. There may be a record of topics discussed or time spent while in a mentoring program. Informal mentorship occurs outside of this kind of formality. It is considered to be as powerful and as important to individuals seeking mentorship and to the organization as formal mentorship (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). This concept was also confirmed through the focus group participants and through feedback from the CASS Board of Directors while in discussion about CASS's mentorship program. Informal mentoring is spontaneous and arises out of specific needs. Focus group members shared how significant it was to maintain a professional relationship with a former mentor or mentee long after the formal program had ended. Informal supportive professional relationships can be immensely helpful to individuals seeking such relationships in a school or school division. Members of the CASS Board of Directors highlighted the importance of being able to speak with individuals from other school divisions in an open and informal way. The informal aspect of mentoring was seen to be powerful and even encouraged.

Traditional mentoring may be a way of reproducing organizational norms, behaviours and expectations. Alternate conceptions of mentoring, such as constructivist and transformational mentoring, have been linked with organizational innovation and culture shifting (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Whether mentoring is formal or informal, to develop an accredited mentorship program, whatever the goals of mentorship are, formality and informality must be considered since both have impact on the participants and their respective organizations.

6 Key Components of a Successful Mentorship Program

Successful mentorship includes multiple components that are made up of common social-emotional factors, psycho-social commitments, as well as common practices. These components and factors along with relevant sources are noted in Table 1.

Table 1 Key Components of Successful Mentorship Programs

Social-Emotional Factors	Description	Source
Trust	Positive feelings and confidence in professional relationship	(Grocutt et al., 2022)
Tie-Strength	Closeness in a mentoring relationship, which can be continuum of weak to strong	(Dawson, 2014)
Provision for social and emotional support	Acknowledgement of social-emotional components in a mentoring relationship	Johnson et al. (2007) in (Dominguez & Kochan, 2020)
Open communication	Comfort with disclosing information within a professional and supportive relationship	(Grocutt et al., 2022)
Reflection	Connected with open communication, critical reflection on experiences offers opportunities to learn	(Crow, 2012; DeForge et al., 2019; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021)
Joint goal setting	Joint establishment of learning goals, primarily led by the mentee	(Dawson, 2014; Grocutt et al., 2022; Irby et al., 2020; Kiltz et al., 2004)
Regularly scheduled meetings	Whether face to face or virtual, a commitment to regularly scheduled meetings	(Ayoobzadeh, 2019; Dawson, 2014)
Norms or expectations for meetings	Jointly established norms and expectations for meeting	(Daresh & Playko, 1994; Dawson, 2014)
Engagement and commitment	Committing to the mentoring relationship and to ongoing engagement of the program	(Dawson, 2014; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Grocutt et al., 2022)
Monitoring and accountability	The demonstration of commitment to the mentoring relationship and the organization supporting mentorship	(Dawson, 2014)

Closure or termination	Formal end to mentorship program that often includes a final reflection for the future and/or an evaluation	(Dawson, 2014; Kiltz et al., 2004)

Depending on the researchers' goals and topics, many mentorship programs have some common, identifiable components (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Crow, 2012; Dawson, 2014; DeForge et al., 2019; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Grocutt et al., 2022). Considering the components identified in Table 1, these ought to be reflected upon and integrated with the CASS vision, mission, and policies, as well as in the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act (2021). A proposed mentorship model could include the following components:

- role definitions with delineated responsibilities,
- initiating learning plan – learning outcomes for mentees and mentors,
- reflective practices and opportunities,
- professional learning meetings for mentors and mentees,
- resource materials with links to professional practice standards,
- supportive school division leadership and policies, and
- final learning plan report, reflection on what has been learned.

7 Conclusion

This literature review regarding mentorship in educational leadership settings provides an updated set of perspectives from a variety of researchers. Several types of mentoring have been defined and described. The definitions range from traditional to progressive in nature and show that mentorship in schools and school divisions incorporate several types of mentoring. As the literature suggests, definitions of mentorship are difficult to get agreement on; however, this definitional problem does not prevent mentorship from occurring and from mentorship participants to have a fruitful and fulfilling experience.

This review also highlights components of mentorship that align and are applicable to schools and school divisions in Alberta. Alberta's professional practice standards communicate a set of competencies for teachers and educational leaders. The standards guide teachers' and leaders' learning and practice. Effective mentorship can support educational leaders in their pursuit of leadership and system excellence. Finally, this review paves the way for an updated model of mentorship supporting CASS and building system leadership excellence to ensure optimal learning for all students.

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