"Chapter 7 Supervisors and Teacher-Leaders as Mentors or Coaches

The chapter supports your growing capacity to

compare reflective supervision to the mentoring and coaching process;

transfer skills and abilities from supervision or teaching to mentoring and coaching;

meet the needs of a specific professional development (PD) context by choosing technical or innovative strategies; and

contribute to the growth of authentic mentors, coaches, and leaders.

This chapter will focus on supervisors and teacher-leaders as mentors or coaches of early childhood teachers. The process of reflective supervision is explored for its power to promote increased competence in early childhood professionals while providing a process for respectful partnership and open communication among staff in the same program.

A teacher was leaving her position; and on her last day, our director sang our goodbye song to her. I started to cry and so did the teacher who was leaving. Our director finished the song and looked at the children and said, “They are crying because they love working and being together. It can be hard to say goodbye.” The children seemed to accept the emotions of their teachers because they knew why we were sad and could empathize with us. I have learned a lot from that director. She modeled the way to build relationships and mentored others through her actions.

(Teacher interview about being mentored by a supervisor, May 2012)

Matching mentoring or coaching responses to program conditions requiring compliance with technical requirements and adapting work to support a focus on producing innovative change are examined. The chapter uses the NAEYC and NACCRRA (2011) definitions for mentoring and coaching. Throughout this book, for ease of reading, the term mentor has been used when either term (coach or mentor) could correctly be applied to the strategies described. In this chapter, both terms, mentor and coach, will be used to emphasize the combination of the specific skill set needed by a curriculum coach and the general adult learning facilitation skills of the mentor.

Mentoring

A relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles, with a more experienced individual with adult learning knowledge and skills, the mentor, providing guidance and example to the less-experienced protégé, or mentee. Mentoring is intended to increase an individual’s personal or professional capacity, resulting in greater professional effectiveness (Lutton, 2012, p.84).

Coaching

A relationship-based process led by an expert with specialized adult-learning knowledge and skills who often serves in a different professional role than the recipient(s). Coaching is designed to build capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors and is focused on goal-setting and achievement for an individual or group (Lutton, 2012, p. 85).

Reflective Supervision and Mentoring or Coaching

The literature on early childhood mentoring and coaching cautions against supervisors’ taking on the additional role of educational mentor or coach to the teachers and professionals in their schools, programs, and organizations (American Institutes for Research, 2001, pp. 24–26). The supervisor’s taking on the role of mentor or coach may be problematic because supervisors usually participate in hiring, firing, and conducting official evaluations. Teachers may worry that when directors, principals, or other direct supervisors act as mentors or coaches, shared concerns could be misused as evidence of teachers not meeting existing program or teaching standards. Supervisors also tend to focus on the program’s big picture and are results oriented. A mentor or coach needs to put the teacher’s learning first while individualizing support to meet specific learning needs over time. The roles would seem to be frequently in conflict.

However, access to support for a teacher in a job-embedded one-on-one mentoring or coaching experience may impose barriers of cost, access, and the time needed for participation. Additionally, many teachers prefer to learn alongside, and be mentored by, a trusted professional from their own organization or school, whom they already know well. Issues of cultural and linguistic relevancy or other important aspects of finding the best “fit” between a teacher and a mentor sometimes point to a supervisor or teacher-leader as a mentor of choice by a teacher in a program.

Strong supervisor–teacher relationships have the potential to meet a teacher’s needs in emergent contexts that formal mentoring programs cannot address. Daily check-in meetings, staff meetings, and individual conferences offer both parties frequent opportunities for reflective analysis of, for example, especially intense interactions with children and families. In some situations, the frequent mentoring needs of a teacher—along with the willingness and availability that a trusted supervisor or a teacher-leader has to mentor that teacher—may make this the optimal learning relationship. In many childcare, preschool, or Head Start settings, an appropriate teacher-mentor may be the program manager or another experienced teacher who has an official role of overseeing curriculum, instruction, or other specific program responsibilities, such as home visiting or family support services.

Supervisors who have a reputation for collaboration and who are seen as having a strong commitment to ongoing learning facilitation, are often viewed as leaders from whom other teachers want to learn (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2010, pp. 95–102). In the birth-to-age-3 program area, as well as in related human services and mental health roles, a tradition of providing reflective supervision is well established and has responsibilities and characteristics similar to mentoring (Eggbeer, Mann, and Seibel, 2007). The traditions of both early childhood mentoring and reflective supervision differ from the broader duties of general supervision because they focus on offering empathy and support to staff, and facilitated reflection on staff reactions to their work (Parlakian, 2002; Weatherston, Weigand, & Weigand, 2010). These qualities are intended to promote professional growth over time and are described in this recollection:

The best supervisors I’ve had listened intently, found something to value, and then recast what I told then, embellishing it with something of their own. The experience of good supervision is like finding a fellow traveler on a challenging journey, a companion worthy of trust who has visited similar destinations. This fellow traveler knows many routes to our goal but is open to discovering a different path, a path we walk together, often with me in the lead, except when I miss the flowers to smell or when I stumble or can’t find my way. Then, the supervisor is there to guide, even to prod a little, to bolster my courage and to help me regain my footing and focus, to help me find my strength.

(Shahmoon-Shanok, 1992, p 37).

Reflection

Jeree Pawl, an infant mental health expert, says, “Do unto others as you would have others do onto others” (Pawl and St. John, 1998, p. 7). She cites professionals who work with parents, treating the parent the way that they hope the parent will interact with his or her child. Recall a time when you were supervised in a way that modeled for you how to teach children and work with their parents. If you have not had that experience, consider whether you have provided this experience for other adults. How has supervision that promotes reflection on your work also acted as professional mentoring for you? Were there also pitfalls to viewing a supervisor as a professional mentor?

What Is Reflective Supervision?

Supervisors who take the responsibility to guide teachers’ decision-making through reflection are engaged in a form of apprenticeship or on-the-job mentoring known as reflective supervision (Scott Heller and Gilkerson, 2009). This means that supervisors who are teacher-leaders (i.e., professional peers who are more experienced than the teacher-mentee and who are responsible for overseeing curriculum or another program area) use some of the same mentoring techniques in staff meetings and emergent discussions with teachers that mentors use with teachers in a formal professional-development or mentoring relationship. Consider the following question:

What conditions are required for teachers to experience effective mentoring by a supervisor or teacher-leader?

Relationships between supervisors and teachers are built on nurturance, empathy, and shared experiences. All involved have a shared desire to learn and support each other. Both mentors and teachers are comfortable being explicit about their role at any given time, as well comfortable with the question, “What hat are you wearing now, supervisor or mentor?”

The person acting as mentor is able to apply skills for promoting reflection and professional growth in a teacher, without judgment or criticism.

The process of reflective supervision is facilitated by someone who has demonstrated professional competencies (and has an interest in continuing to grow and learn), as identified by the Best Practice Guidelines for Reflective Supervision/Consultation in the following areas: “. . . wondering, responding with empathy yet sharing knowledge if a crisis arises, inviting contemplation rather than imposing solutions, recognizing parallel process, supporting curiosity, remaining open, and recognizing the power of relationship as it affects health and growth” (Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health, 2004 as cited in Weatherston, Weigand, and Weigand, 2010, p. 25).

The teacher is willing to accept, and voluntarily accepts, the supervisor or leader in the role of helping them reflect on immediate daily experiences. The teachers feel that sharing their thoughts, feelings, and responses to what they are observing and doing with children and families will be helpful to promoting both the children’s and their own growth and development.

The supervisors, or teacher-leaders, clearly identify when they have power and control (i.e, requiring the use of an assessment tool or specific curriculum approach). Supervisors or leaders are trustworthy and do not have any “secret agendas.” They also identify what hat they are wearing (i.e., mentor or supervisor) and are able to shift to the mentoring or reflective supervision stance by listening to and facilitating, for example, ways in which a curriculum approach is being adapted to the specific context of a teacher’s classroom.

The teachers and supervisors, or program leaders, have a history of successful problem-solving experiences and have mutually decided that they want more time together (e.g., official release time from usual work duties) to examine these or similar questions:

What tensions, issues, or problems exist?

What is already working?

What are the teaching and program strengths and existing competencies?

What teaching and program areas need strengthening?

How should the supervisor or teacher-leader acting as mentor begin to promote reflection on daily work?

Don’t assume anything. Begin to mentor by listening and asking plenty of questions. Remember, your role is to support a shift in a teacher’s understanding by helping a teacher to solve his or her own problems.

Practice giving undivided attention to the person being mentored. Parlakian (2002, p.3) notes that being present as a mentor is the place to begin.

Promoting a teacher’s reflection on his or her practices means that a supervisor acting as a mentor should take the following actions:

Stop and listen to the teacher: Avoid multi-tasking, and focus on listening and paying attention to the teacher seeking mentoring. This is hard to do at first but is essential. Turn off the phone, close the door, and listen.

Look and learn from the teacher: Consider this question: What is the teacher telling you with his or her nonverbal cues? Do not rely on what you think you already know about this teacher’s background, temperament, or experience. Your goal is to learn what is important to this teacher, how he or she thinks and feels, and what he or she is doing about it.

Listen and wonder together: Ask yourself, What are the perspectives and emotions surrounding the teacher’s issue? Visualize this teacher as competent and capable, and listen to his or her perspective. Ask questions and make comments for the purpose of clarifying and understanding the teacher’s point of view, not yet for solving a problem or directing a solution.

Respond that you have heard and understood: Check with the teacher to ascertain whether or not your understanding is correct. The most important goal is for the reflective supervisor to let the teacher know that he or she is heard and understood.

Check:What is this teacher’s timeline? Learn from the teacher the answer to this question: Is this an emergency requiring immediate discussion about the teacher’s hypothesis for a specific situation? Does the teacher need immediate support analyzing and planning for a response? Or can the mentor and teacher make an appointment for future action planning? Remember, this timeline is based on the teacher’s perceptions of need.

Plan for future action steps: Make a plan, or simply make an appointment to make a plan. The action phase requires time to brainstorm together questions to investigate (i.e., collecting more information or observing). Plan goals together. As you learn more, modify your questions, and keep researching and talking. Collaborate to engage in a cycle of observing, reflecting, and responding described in earlier chapters.

Transferring Skills and Abilities From Supervising or Teaching to Mentoring and Coaching

Supervisors and teachers who have learned how each relationship affects another (e.g., a supervisor’s interactions with the teacher affect that teacher’s interactions with a child) have the raw ingredients needed for reflective supervision. The disposition and the critical ability to analyze the importance of all relationships in an early childhood program are essential to the reflective supervision process.

Is Reflective Supervision a Way to Mentor Teachers?

Not all supervisors or teacher-leaders should mentor teachers in their own programs. First, consider the list of reflective supervision competencies based on those developed by the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (2004) as shown in Table 7.1. Next, recall an occasion when a supervisor or teacher-leader in your experience has demonstrated these competencies, and jot down examples with children and/or adults. Finally, reflect on how consistently these competencies were modeled. Interview the person whom you are thinking about for this role—or reflect on yourself—and ask, Does the supervisor or teacher-leader consistently, sometimes, or rarely exhibit these competencies? Put a “c,” “s,” or “r” next to each competency example.

Taking the time to consider the characteristics of a leader who is able to support reflection in a teacher is the first step to understanding how a supervisor supports teachers to accomplish their goals through mentoring. Part of the function of leadership in an early childhood program setting is the simple act of positively influencing the people in the program environment. Facilitating the development of teachers and empowering them are also roles of a mentor.

Table 7.1 Competency Checklist for Supervisors and Teacher-Leaders

Does the supervisor or teacher-leader have the following competencies? Recall evidence of behaviors with children and adults.

Competency

Describe an example of a teacher-leader with children (when acting as a teacher)

Describe an example of a teacher-leader with adults (when acting as a supervisor)

Listens well, does not interrupt, and respects the pace of the other person

Is able to wait for others to discover solutions, form own ideas, and reflect

Asks questions that encourage details

Is aware of and comfortable with his or her feelings and the emotions of others

Is responsive to others

Guides/nurtures and supports/empathizes

Integrates emotion and intellect

Fosters reflection or wondering by others

Is aware of how others’ reactions affect a process of dialogue and reflection, including sensitivity to bias and cultural context

Is willing to have consistent and predictable meeting times and places

Is flexible and available

Is able to form trusting relationships

Based on the work of Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (2004). Best practice guidelines for reflective supervision/ consultation. Retrieved from http://www.mi-aimh.org/reflective-supervision

Leader, Manager, or a Teacher: How Do These Roles Relate to the Role of Mentor?

Ideas about the differences between leaders and managers were once framed as opposites. The well-known quote by Warren Bennis (1989) that “managers do things right while leaders do the right thing” situated managers as concerned mostly with completing tasks, whereas the work of setting visions and goals was inspired by leaders. In programs for children that operate with processes of distributed leadership, supervisors or teacher-leaders usually have qualities of both leaders and managers. In a distributed leadership style (Spillane and Diamond, 2007), hierarchical relationships of power over others are replaced by a more democratic process. Leaders and managers are both focused not only on why to do something (leadership function) but also on when to do it (management task). Both maintaining and developing teachers through inspiring trust (leadership) and communicating bottom lines of budget, regulatory, or other constraints on decision-making (management) are required supervisory abilities in most early childhood education (ECE) programs. Long- and short-term considerations are integrated by supervisors when they help teachers to see how the immediate needs of children can be connected to the hopes and dreams of their parents and to a teacher’s vision for the children’s long-term healthy development and learning. Excellent supervisors both model tried-and-true strategies for teachers and encourage new and novel ideas to be developed by them.

If the role of the supervisor or other key leaders in a program is to be focused on day-to-day issues as well as on inspiring the attainment of goals, then where do mentoring teachers fit into these responsibilities? Is it also appropriate for the supervisor to be a leader in learning or a mentor to teachers? Antonacopoulou and Bento (2004) describe the role of learning as being at the heart of leadership: “Leadership is not taught and leadership is not learned. Leadership is learning.” (p. 82). This view would indicate that, at a minimum, the supervisor should model a learning disposition for the teachers in a program or school. Fullan (2008), an expert in school and other organizational change, states that “you can achieve consistency and innovation only through deep and consistent learning in context” (p. 86). If deep learning does not occur in a vacuum and cannot be simply transmitted to someone in an adult-education classroom, then improving teaching practices must occur in a social context (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and methods to that end should be constructed by the learner (Bruner, 1996; (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Consideration of these ideas about learning, as well as reflection on the suggested competencies needed for mentoring, will help a supervisor to evaluate whether serving as both leader and mentor is appropriate in a given context.

Reflection

Consider a time when you or someone you have closely observed has taken on the duties of managing or leading in an educational organization. Discuss several of the duties and skills of a manager who effectively keeps a school running. Then, discuss a few strengths that you have observed in a leader who is able to help teachers identify and discuss the vision and direction in which a children’s program should go. Have you seen all of these skills present in one person? Finally, do you think it is possible for persons acting as managers or leaders in a school to also act as mentors to teachers? Have you witnessed such dual roles in action? What questions do you have about juggling multiple roles and responsibilities? What cultural or community considerations are important as the functions of leading, managing and mentoring are considered? Keep these questions in mind as you read the next section.

Leaders Acting as Mentors: What Do They Want to Have Happen?

Any tensions existing between the two functions of leading and mentoring teachers may be brought to the surface by the supervisor’s answering a few initial questions:

What do I want to have happen?

How do I hope to influence or inspire this teacher in areas in which he or she wants to learn?

How will I also monitor and direct the teacher in areas that are not negotiable?

If the supervisor’s answers point to using a facilitative style of leadership, which involves using a leader’s power for the benefit of the teacher’s learning (and not as only power over the teacher), the responses might include something similar to any of the following:

I will first focus on noticing the emerging interests, abilities, and questions of the teacher.

After listening, observing, and dialoguing with the teacher, I will support him or her with resources and opportunities to explore the area of interest.

If what the teacher wants to learn is outside of my area of expertise, I will find another teacher in the program to work alongside him or her as a peer mentor.

Understanding what a teacher wants and needs to learn might evolve into big changes or simply new skills for the teacher, but we will negotiate the areas for continued learning.

I will be clear as to times when I am acting as a supervisor who needs to direct all staff to comply with a policy and times when I am acting as a mentor.

If I find it too challenging to keep these different roles clear in my mind, I will remove myself from the mentoring role.

If the teacher prefers to increase his or her professional development through another method (e.g., a course, community mentor program, teacher learning group, then) I am willing to support the teacher’s preferred way of learning and growing as a professional.

If the supervisor is less accustomed to the role of mentor, then his or her responses might be centered around an initial and continuing desire on his or her part for a focus on evaluation, monitoring, and directing the teacher in a step-by-step way. Although a new teacher may need and want technical direction, the key disposition for a supervisor acting as a mentor is to focus first on supporting the teacher in a way that allows the teacher to feel comfortable in taking the risk to grow and learn. This is sometimes called a servant leadership style (Greenleaf and Spears, 2002) and is characterized by a leader who meets organizational needs by serving others before focusing on his or her own needs and goals. However, a mentor is much more than a servant to a teacher. The supervisor acting as mentor should also focus heavily on facilitating teamwork and collaboration for the purpose of supporting learning.

The teacher interested in having a supervisor act as the professional-development mentor should ask the questions that follow. The teacher should, of course, feel free to keep his or her answers confidential and for use only as a personal self-reflection tool.

Am I concerned that I could be punished for noncompliance if I don’t follow the professional-development advice of my supervisor?

Do I admire and respect this supervisor and think that I can learn something from him or her?

Do I understand the specific areas and situations in which the supervisor has the right to direct my behavior and prescribe my choices?

If teachers are nervous about compliance, do not feel that they will learn what they hope to learn, and do not have high regard for the supervisor, the learning relationship may not be effective (Zeece, 2003). Also, when teachers are worried that they will be confused about compliance if they are working with a supervisor as mentor or if they are not in a situation allowing for an open conversation about their learning, then a mentor who is not the supervisor will be a better choice for them. The feelings of the teacher are important to consider. Attitudes often change over time, even toward the same supervisor. Respecting a teacher’s feelings by allowing him or her to end a formal mentoring relationship with a supervisor is a delicate situation for both persons. However, supervisors who respect teachers’ needs to be mentored by someone else should remember to offer the teacher the opportunity to be part of a mentoring relationship with them later, when the time is right. A leader who is flexible and is able to change when the teacher’s situation or needs change is modeling situational leadership. This sort of leader is using his or her emotional intelligence, or awareness of how a teacher feels, and is translating that knowledge into respect and understanding (Bruno, 2009).

Supervisors who sincerely want to inspire and influence teachers to be more effective and are emotionally aware of the feelings and aspirations of their staff have the potential for transforming the way the staff approaches complex problems. Sullivan (2010) notes that the early childhood education profession is a field of mostly women, many of whom value putting the needs of others above their own. Considering the prevalence of low-pay and high-turnover conditions in the early childhood field, it seems important to weigh the benefits and challenges of helping supervisors and teacher-leaders to see themselves also as mentors. Reflect on whether imposing multiple roles might be another way to overburden professionals who are already overextended in their support of teachers in classrooms, programs, and family and community organizations. There are no simple answers to this question.

Reflection

Consider the scenarios that follow. Imagine that one participant is the mentor and that the other is the ECE teacher, director, or other staff person in these scenarios. Choose one scenario to role-play or write about, and describe the possible reactions of both the supervisor and the teacher who is being mentored in the scenario. Reflect on the feelings, skills, and knowledge needed for the learning relationship to be productive and successful for all involved (teacher, supervisor, and others noted).

Servant leadership that facilitates the growth of others. Consider a teacher-leader who mentors another teacher in how to use problem-solving techniques with preschoolers.

Situational leadership in which a teacher takes on a new style to fit the demands of the situation. A health or safety crisis requires directive behavior by a program manager or family childcare owner who usually has a facilitative style.

Long-term relationships in an ECE program that offer an opportunity for transformational change. A teacher takes a college course on creating a program for dual-language learners. He or she then works with a supervisor and several teachers with bilingual education expertise who mentor him or her in applying the new learning to fit the needs of the enrolled children.

Meeting the Needs of the Situation by Choosing Technical or Innovative Strategies

Business models of leadership and supervision often do not reflect the values or the vision promoted by the early childhood education field. Rather than a tradition of competitive individualism, most early learning settings maintain the vision of creating and maintaining a caring and interdependent community. Although these ideals are not always achieved, behaviors of collegiality and advocating for children and families are traditional values and strengths of most early childhood program supervisors. The toolbox of a leader who has thrived while navigating the many challenges of leading an early learning program contains the strategies needed to cope with a very complex set of professional variables. The experiences of a supervisor or teacher-leader who has met challenges requiring technical responses (e.g., implementing new health department food safety protocols) or innovative responses (e.g., fostering greater partnerships with families of enrolled children) to needed change are also very relevant to a mentoring process.

When supervisors act in the role of mentor, they are able to help teachers reframe their questions so that problems can be solved through inquiry (Schon, 1983; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). This style of mentoring requires the ability to motivate, to encourage participation, and to innovate for or adapt to a changing situation (Kagan, Sockalingham, Walker, and Zachik, 2010). A supervisor may also have a wealth of technical knowledge that is just right for a teacher who needs to increase specific skills. A key decision point for supervisors acting as mentors is to recognize the difference between technical and innovative/adaptive support needs. If a teacher is concerned about a lack of participation of Spanish-speaking families in a school’s open house events and requests mentoring on family involvement strategies, both technical and adaptive responses are appropriate. Does the teacher want to learn the process for translating information flyers into Spanish (technical response), or does he or she want the supervisor to facilitate his or her work with other teachers as part of a family partnership team (innovative or adaptive response)? The second response will require skills in the mentor for supporting a cycle of observation, interpretation of information gathered, and planning for action. Most teacher learning challenges require both technical and adaptive work to be solved. However, not all supervisors are skilled in the complexities of adaptive work.

Reflection

Review Table 7.2. Notice the different characteristics of the challenges offered to supervisors and teachers who are working on issues needing technical or innovative responses. After reading the chart, consider a time when you were acting as either a teacher or a supervisor (or other leader) and you were dealing with a work-based dilemma. Remember—or interview a supervisor or teacher who can recall—when

technical work was needed;

innovative or adaptive work was needed; or

some of both responses were needed to address an issue or problem.

Review the chart one more time as you consider the following: What are your areas of strength, and in what areas do you have little experience? In what area would you like to increase your abilities to be able to respond to workplace challenges and/or to mentor others to do so?

Table 7.2 Leader Acting as Mentor

What response should be used for the learning issue or problem of the teachers being mentored?

Characteristics of challenges for leaders and teachers

Technical Response Needed

Innovative or Adaptive Response Needed

A clear and defined response is needed to a specific problem.

The problem is not clear or defined, and many points of view, challenges, and solutions need to be examined.

Values, beliefs, and perspectives in a work-based problem

Goal is to move teachers to share the same point of view and reproduce results with fidelity to a research-based protocol.

Goal is to bring out all the voices present on a topic and move staff to generate solutions that best fit a program issue.

Specific sources of information must be examined.

A safe discussion climate encourages participation.

Topic example: Health and safety practices.

Topic example: Family involvement programs tailored to the local community.

Issues and action needed

The issue is understood by all, or technical assistance is given to provide understanding. Need exists for organization, delegation, and clear direction.

Collaborative learning processes should be facilitated to support new learning. Need exists for establishing a climate that motivates and encourages new ideas.

Issue example: A program fundraising dilemma with a short timeline.

Issue example: Compliance with new education standards that honor the philosophy of the teachers in the program.

Assets of participants Involved

Participants have answers and authority or responsibility to comply with regulations. Control or power issues are involved.

Questions and facilitation of inquiry should be implemented. Collaboration is sought after group agrees on a solution.

Situation example: A federal review of a Head Start program uncovers dangerous playground conditions.

Situation example: Teacher-leaders support staff to document children’s actions and interpret their possible meanings.

Leader: Solutions and decisions

Leader has solutions and makes decisions.

Leader seeks solutions with others through a process for decision-making.

Response example: Owners of family childcare programs involved in an administration study group later inform enrolled families that tuition must be raised to maintain the quality of care.

Response example: A weekly discussion with teachers working on new home-visiting strategies.

Process and vision

Day-to–day routines and challenges are explained.

The big picture is explained and patterns described.

Response example: Established routines are described to a new teacher.

Response example: The program vision is contrasted with actual observed practices. This dilemma is presented without solutions, for staff discussion.

Based on Heifertz, 1994; Heifertz & Linsky, 2002; Heifertz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009.

Assessing a situation for the appropriate response is what both leaders and teachers do on a daily basis. Having a respected supervisor make visible their process for making decisions is invaluable to a teacher being mentored. The courage and integrity that a supervisor displays in identifing gaps in performance and in taking responsibility to join with teachers on their learning journeys can be dangerous if the supervisor does not have corresponding skills or does not recognize that there are many ways to respond to teacher dilemmas. Before supervisors agree to mentor a teacher, they need to take inventory of their own technical and adaptive facilitation skills. Teachers and supervisors are capable of holding multiple professional identities (including supervisor and mentor) in mind for both for themselves and for others by clearly identifying roles and supporting each other’s daily interactions in “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). Conversely, a self-aware supervisor knows when to delegate mentoring or other adult education functions, to another person to better fit what a situation needs.

Growing Authentic Leaders and Mentors

In The Power of Mentoring. Taking the Lead: Investing in Early Childhood Leadership for the 21st Century,

Elliott et al. (2000) suggest the importance of recruiting emerging or grassroots early childhood leaders as mentors from candidates who represent and understand a community. Some of these mentor candidates will be acting within the supervisory and teacher-leader roles. Early childhood education and experience qualifications must also include understanding the community context and having cultural competency skills. In some settings, that will mean that no one person will have all of the qualities, education, and relevant experience needed. Mentoring teams or partnerships of mentors are another way to collectively, meet the qualifications for effectively working with teachers.

Another model is for one mentor to work with small groups of teachers in order to facilitate the power of peer-to-peer sharing, which may have a greater impact than several one-on-one mentoring relationships. Questions that relate to meeting the challenge of providing culturally responsive mentoring include the following:

Is the planning group for a mentoring program made up of members of the local community and cultural groups?

Does the mentoring program take into account cultural values or standards that should influence the nature or design of the program?

What languages should mentors be able to speak?

Should teachers choose their own mentors?

What qualities do local early childhood teachers seek in a mentor?

Do potential mentors understand the socio-economic issues in the community?

If the mentor is qualified to support learning in a specific early childhood content area, does he or she understand the program context of the teacher (e.g., family childcare, center care, for-profit or nonprofit organization, federally or state-funded preschools)?

Based on Elliot, K., Farris, M., Alvarado, C., Peters, C., Surr, W., Genser, A., & Chin, E. (2000). The power of mentoring. Taking the lead: Investing in early childhood leadership for the 21st century. Boston: The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education at Wheelock College.

Reflection

How could mentoring teams facilitate growth together when one mentor alone might not have the background needed to be effective?

Image that you and several early childhood teachers whom you know are going to become a mentoring team. First, consider and list the knowledge and experience that you bring, both from your life’s journey to date and from your formal education, that might be used to support another early childhood educator’s professional growth and development.

Examples of relevant strengths might be that some people in your group have family and center childcare experience, some speak languages other than English, and others have worked extensively with school-age children or infants. Other valuable knowledge may have been acquired from relevant college courses and degrees or through extensive work with specific curriculums. After compiling these skills, knowledge, and relevant experiences, consider the gaps. What other set of skills, knowledge, or experiences might be needed to create a mentoring team that reflects and meets the needs of your local early-learning community? What professional development might your group need? What additional recruitment is needed of mentors with different strengths?

Summary

Early childhood program supervisors or teacher-leaders are often asked to wear many hats. After reviewing key ideas identified in Figure 7.1, list the implications to the mentoring process of the mentor’s serving multiple roles as a supervisor or teacher-leader and as a mentor or coach.

Figure 7.1 Summary of Issues Surrounding Supervisors and Teacher-Leaders Serving as Mentors or Coaches

For a person to simultaneously serve in management, leadership, and mentoring roles is not uncommon. The overarching question that this chapter has considered is, Is it a good idea to try to fill so many roles at once? A chorus of professionals will say No! due to the predictable pitfalls of mixing up evaluation with mentoring, or directive supervision with fostering learning about questions or topics of interest. However, another large and growing body of evidence from the birth-to-3 profession of the home visiting, human services, and mental health fields have identified reflective supervision as an appropriate set of dispositions, behaviors, and processes that do support the efforts of a supervisor to also successfully mentor teachers. Supervisors who understand their skills sets, who know the difference between the need for technical or innovative responses to problems, and who have strong, trusting relationships with teachers may be successful as mentors. These leaders, acting in the tradition of the best teachers, have learned that “reflection (on) personal experience is empowering for learners because they confront the contradictions of everyday life” (Austin, 2009, p. 160). Finally, the need for a program or community to grow its own leaders and mentors is facilitated by supervisors who model and explicitly mentor others in the process of critically reflecting on daily dilemmas. The support of “sustained professional development that encourages a deep dive into content rather than surface level exploration” is what early childhood teachers are looking for today (Galinsky, 2012, p. 27). Being part of a learning community facilitated by a trusted and skilled supervisor or teacher-leader is one option to explore when the conditions are right for refocusing a supervisory relationship to put the spotlight on a teacher’s learning."