

Mentoring and Coaching School Leaders

A qualitative study of adaptive expertise for school administrators

By Dr. Joanne Robinson

Schools are complex institutions requiring a high level of performance from the individuals who lead them. The role of the principal is increasingly demanding and multi-faceted. While certification and preparatory programs required for teachers moving into administration are valuable, it is only through experience and time in the position that administrators can gain the leadership qualities that help raise performance to expert levels.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has recognized that mentoring and coaching programs are the best way to support newly appointed administrators. Support during the early years of practice – through mentoring from colleagues who bring a breadth and depth of experience – can help minimize frustrating and challenging situations that detract from a leader's development and growth. A qualitative study of the changes in practice and competencies by participants of the

MentoringCoaching experience has led to valuable information for school boards across Ontario, as the expectation for establishing a mentoring program has increased.

Leadership expertise in Ontario is a learning continuum across five domains of *The Ontario Leadership Framework* that can be accelerated through a MentoringCoaching program. A look at the features of a mentoring program that support the development of practices and competencies required in complex school environments has, therefore, revealed interesting results.

Dr. Ken Leithwood (OISE/UofT), and his colleagues have identified school leadership as second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors contributing to student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), yet the process for developing and refining expertise in school leadership remains unclear. In *Development and Adaptation of Expertise: The role of self-regulatory processes and beliefs*, Barry Zimmerman claimed, "the attainment of expertise in diverse fields requires more than nascent talent, initial task interest, and high-quality instruction; it also involves personal initiative, diligence, and especially practice" (2006, p.705).

The intent of the study was to identify ways of developing and refining expertise in school leaders through the use of MentoringCoaching.

Fink and Resnick (2001) asserted that despite an espoused commitment to instructional leadership, most principals are generic managers with little time for such leadership. School leaders must be adaptive experts, and an inquiry to establish the relationship between MentoringCoaching and adaptive expertise was worth initiating. Essential to the study was the determination of features around MentoringCoaching programs that support tri-level leadership capacity with a focus on powerful instruction and student learning. The prediction was that MentoringCoaching programs would help provide assistance and support growth along the expertise continuum in school leadership, and that relationships that formed would allow participants to explore ideas, discuss potential advantages and disadvantages of a decision, give and receive guidance and benefit from others' experience and expertise. A focus on relationships may help to move a district beyond the sink-or-swim treatment of newly-appointed leaders to a culture of support and a community of learners.

The following questions formed the guidelines for the interviews and self-reflection questionnaires:

1. What aspects of MentoringCoaching programs influence school leaders' growth and expertise in the domains of setting direction, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization, leading the instructional program and securing accountability?
2. How does a MentoringCoaching relationship benefit the expertise of mentors, the mentees and a school system as a whole?
3. What features of a MentoringCoaching program in a school district are viewed as building tri-level leadership capacity that focuses on powerful instruction and student learning?

METHODOLOGY

Data came from participants' views of their experience and expertise in school leadership acquired through the MentoringCoaching program, collected through individual interviews, focus group discussions and individual self-reflection questionnaires. The interviews were clustered according to type of participant: mentor, mentee or steering committee. The groupings were based on participants' views of leadership practices and competencies (expertise)

adapted through the participation in the program. The influence of the program was distinctly different for the participants, depending on the perspective through which they were assessing their participation – mentor, mentee or district steering committee member.

The final step involved the creation of a rich description (Moustakas, 1994) for each participant, clarifying results of their MentoringCoaching experience. The invariant constituents and themes, drawn from the rich "textural-structural" (Moustakas, 1994, p.121) accounts, comprised the composite meanings and essences of the group as a whole.

FINDINGS FROM THE MENTORS' PERSPECTIVE

A key benefit of the program for mentors was the coaching training and embedded practice, using new listening and questioning skills in conversations with mentees. All mentors shifted from traditional mentor and 'problem solver' to coach and guide, using active listening and thought-provoking questions. The Framework permitted the mentors to make the paradigm shift from experienced expert to co-learner with ease.

The process for matching mentors with mentees was based on reflection and self-identified areas of strength and growth, according to the Framework. Mentors and mentees went through the exercise independently, and were paired to effectively maximize the learning experience and growth. The structure of the MentoringCoaching program supported the opportunity for both parties to reflect, monitor and refine their performance (Feltovich et al., 2006, p.62). Mentors benefited from self-awareness and self-analysis of their own leadership capacity through the reflective process and the intentional support they were able to offer their mentees, based on a clearer understanding of their own expertise. The calculated process for matching participants built a culture of trust and commitment to professional growth that can be adapted by all school districts to maximize learning.

Educational leadership development is often perceived as something that is done "by" the district "to" leaders and aspiring leaders. In the Ontario study, mentors had the opportunity to meet with mentees, colleagues, learning teams and lead mentors, continually bringing an enhanced level of expertise related to their professional practice through socialization and "the personal networks [that] play an important role and enhance the development of individual competence" (Mieg, 2006, p.757). The networking and

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opportunity to layer and learn interactively from and with colleagues showed positive results. The principal's job can be perceived as isolated and remote, but the opportunities to meet, collaborate and share expertise emerged as a strong conclusive benefit of the program.

The focus on instructional leadership expertise motivated experienced principals who were also on steep learning curves with new system initiatives. While mentors maintained their role as "developmental guides" (Daresh, 2007, p.25), the learning was definitely reciprocal. School districts that provided opportunities for principals and vice-principals to

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experience the socialization advantage of their profession, benefit from an enhanced and accelerated level of expertise among all leaders.

The mentors' ability to listen attentively and ask insightful, probing questions was a transferable skill that carried over to other relationships (i.e., parents, teachers, support staff, students). A program that combines formal mentoring as a district initiative with coaching training for mentors will have a broad impact on the leadership capacity of the experienced mentors, since mentors trained as coaches are more effective leaders in their schools and their communities. The study revealed that setting direction was the most influenced domain of the MentoringCoaching experience.

The benefits to mentors include an increased level of job satisfaction and renewed motivation, along with pride in seeing the school system for which they feel ownership left in the hands of a new generation (Daresh, 2004, p.505). School districts that strategically identify and train experienced leaders will motivate them to feel ownership for future succession planning efforts and embrace the opportunity to influence and nurture new leaders. A system that provides supportive learning environments for new leadership is more likely to have a wealth of talented individuals wishing to come forward.

FINDINGS FROM THE MENTEES' PERSPECTIVE

Hunt (2006) revealed that becoming an expert is hard work and requires social support and encouragement in the early phases (p.14). Paired relationships and group activities provided the opportunity for shared learning that raised mentees' confidence and acquisition of expertise. Effective mentoring programs embed goal-setting and measurement of progress into the relationship between the mentor and mentee (Zachary, 2009, p.31). In the Ontario study, the mentees' goals were required to be aligned with provincial and district priorities. Regardless of the size of the district, school leaders can learn to work in teams/pairs to receive common messages and reflect, revise and plan for improvement. The more school leaders work together, the quicker the pace of adapting recognized expertise to mentees will be accelerated. Like the mentors, the mentees revealed that expertise in setting direction was the domain most influenced. Prior to a role in school administration, the novice leaders had little exposure to this task in the district or the school. The capacity to ensure a clearly articulated vision requiring action was a steep learning curve for mentees.

The study of adaptive expertise through MentoringCoaching offers a glimpse into understanding "the social and motivational factors that push and pull people to persevere" (Feltovich et al., 2006, p.62). Defining expert performance and providing support through coaching and insights are successful strategies that can be applied by school districts universally. The mentees were more confident in their professional practice, had a deeper understanding of implementing theory into practice, benefited from regular interaction on an array of common issues, learned some best practices and knew there was concern for their well-being (Daresh, 2007, p.504). One conclusive result of the study is that a formal MentoringCoaching program, such as the one provided through the OPC, is an effective training method allowing individual mentees to acquire levels of performance and expertise that can be accelerated by the experience.

FINDINGS FROM THE STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVE

The steering committee members identified setting direction as most strongly impacted by participation in the MentoringCoaching program. The distinction expressed by committee members relative to their unique role in the program was the responsibility they felt for developing the organization. The domain of leadership expertise developed for the province, entitled *Developing the Organization* identified skills and competencies such as building a collaborative culture,

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collaborating and networking and understanding models of effective partnerships. The committee described elevation in professional conversations among participants as a major cultural shift within their district. Using the Framework as the foundation of the program confirms that defining standards and performance criteria in a profession can address issues of public confidence and trust in expert services (Mieg, 2006). Setting goals and measuring progress against the defined standards of expertise also built internal confidence among participants.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings demonstrate that mentoring programs, which clearly articulate skills and competencies have a heightened level of exchange between mentors and mentees, focusing on adapting the educational expertise associated with effective practice. In Ontario, there are many new initiatives relative to leading the instructional program, but experience is not necessarily synonymous with expertise. Mentors benefited from the MentoringCoaching experience as equal partners with the mentees. **Furthermore, by uniquely**

layering coaching with the concept of mentoring and associating it with expertise, a platform for accelerated leadership development was formed. Additionally, the opportunity to learn with colleagues about effective strategies for setting direction within the context of numerous new initiatives was recorded as an unmistakable benefit of participation.

The certified professional coaching and training provided to all of the mentors and many of the mentees comprised the pivotal element that inspired a genuine change in leadership practice for mentors, mentees and the steering committee members. Reflective practice, active listening, thought-provoking questioning and deliberate humility were the competencies that participants highlighted and believed accounted for the positive influence of the program. The effect was not solely directed toward the MentoringCoaching relationships, but toward the leadership expertise that was adapted and utilized in daily practice, both inside and outside the school environment. ▲

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