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Just another meeting?: Investigating mentoring for early childhood teachers in Victoria

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IN A TIME OF REFORM FOR children's services in Australia, this paper explores the current mentoring programs on offer to the early childhood sector in the state of Victoria. The commissioned research involved the mapping of existing mentoring programs, supported by an extensive literature review. A thematic analysis of the data identified the following aspects as impacting on the success of the programs: the value placed on mentoring; the mentor's role; the level of support and training for mentors; the availability of resources; the divisions between mentoring and other management functions; tailoring of mentoring to individual professional desires and needs; and the presence or absence of formal evaluations to inform the future success of programs. The questions raised by this research prompt further consideration as to what mentoring for early childhood practitioners should look like in the future, especially related to collaborative practice and the balance between autonomy and guidance.

Introduction

Situated within a time of reform for children's services in Australia, this paper grew out of the brief by the Department of Education and Training (DET) (formerly known as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, DEECD), Victoria, Australia, to explore the current mentoring capacity of the early childhood sector with a view to developing future mentoring arrangements for 'new to the profession' or 'professionally isolated' early childhood teachers. We were also charged with developing and implementing a mentoring program for such teachers that provided access to mentoring relationships. The *State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers* offered mentees targeted support in the delivery of their programs, along with networking opportunities. The mentors had the chance to take on a leadership role, developing and exercising their mentoring skills, as they shared their knowledge within the profession.

Related literature

The research literature points out that making the transition from pre-service teacher to beginning teacher is a challenging experience, which is made all the more difficult by the current reform agenda. Mentoring has been identified as playing an important role within effective

professional learning models for supporting 'new to the profession' early childhood teachers, as effective mentoring reduces teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) and enhances outcomes for children through changes to practice (Nolan, Morrissey, Beahan & Dumenden, 2012b; Nolan & Beahan, 2013). Much has been written on the benefits of mentoring for both mentees and mentors in supporting and extending professional learning, improving reflective practice, supporting novice teachers, and impacting educational systems (Boyer & Lee, 2001; Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003; Long et al., 2012; McCormick & Brennan, 2001; Moir & Gless, 2001; Waterman & Ye, 2011).

However, reviewers of the mentoring literature also point out the inconsistencies in findings on the effectiveness of mentoring, including in relation to support for novice teachers, and their retention. Long et al. (2012), for example, seek to problematise mentoring as 'the taken-for-granted solution to the problem of early career teacher attrition' (p. 7). Both Long et al. (2012) and Waterman and Ye (2011), in their reviews of mentoring research, identify the inconsistent findings of links between mentoring programs, and teacher attrition and novice teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring programs in supporting their professional development and identity. These authors point to the complexity of researching in this area, including factors such as: the variability of mentoring

programs; limitations of narrow research approaches, the complex non-linear relationship between mentoring and teacher support and retention; and the myriad of variables influencing outcomes, including individual teacher characteristics and contextual factors (Long et al., 2012; Waterman & Ye, 2011). The situation is even more complex in relation to mentoring of early childhood teachers, as most of the research on mentoring is focused on programs in the very different contexts of primary and secondary schools.

Reviewers also note a recent move towards conceptualising induction of new teachers, including mentoring, as a *process*, and a focus on the importance of novice teachers' development of their professional *identity* as teachers (Devos, 2010; Long et al., 2012; Rippon & Martin, 2006; Waterman & Ye, 2011). Long et al. (2012) note that a more holistic approach to researching mentoring has identified that highly collaborative school cultures, that value all teachers' professional knowledge, including that of novice teachers, appear most successful in retaining teachers. This resonates with a reciprocal approach to mentoring, where there is a move away from the traditional expert-novice model, to one that allows for a broader, networking approach (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). This approach is non-hierarchical, instead building a reciprocal, collaborative partnership. Also noted in the literature are essential attributes of mentoring programs (Roberts, 2000) such as the need for supportive relationships, a teaching-learning process, a reflective process and a formalised process (Nolan, Morrissey & Dumenden, 2012a). Moreover, mentor qualities (Rowley, 1999) are seen as impacting on the mentoring experience, with importance placed on mentors being committed to helping and accepting others, skilled at providing support, having effective interpersonal skills, and holding a belief in mentees' abilities.

Effective mentoring programs are seen as ones where goals are established and roles defined so that expectations are clear to all involved (Gallagher, Abbott-Shim & VandeWiele, 2011a, 2011b; Pavia, Nissen, Hawkins, Monroe & Filimon-Demyen, 2003), mentors are trained and receive ongoing support in their role (Stanulis & Russell, 2000), planned meetings and visits occur, time is devoted to developing the relationships between mentor and mentees (Stanulis & Russell, 2000) and there is a focus on collaborative dialogue and reflection on practice (Elliott, 2004). What is strongly suggested in the literature is that mentoring programs need to allow for the uniqueness of each mentoring relationship, tailoring the program to meet the needs of each participant (Pavia et al., 2003).

Research methodology

The research project involved the mapping of existing mentoring programs on offer to early childhood teachers across the state of Victoria, Australia, with the characteristics of these mentoring initiatives noted. For the purpose of

this study, mentoring programs were chosen if their title designated that they were a mentoring program, or if they incorporated some type of collegial interaction and support. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the different programs, and related documents were sourced in order to build up a comprehensive understanding of each program. Any information publicly available relating to each initiative was also sourced. Unfortunately, access to some reports/materials was restricted due to confidentiality requirements, and some documents that were to be made publicly available could not be accessed.

In order to locate the mentoring initiatives across the state of Victoria, regional DET staff were contacted to assist in the identification of these programs. Leads were then followed up via phone and/or email contact and an appointment made for an interview. Interviews were conducted over the phone or face-to-face, depending on remoteness of location. Interviews often led to the identification of further contacts and programs which were subsequently included in the data collection phase. Early childhood student teachers at the two universities where the project was situated were asked to help identify any programs they were familiar with due to their practical placements in children's services. Researchers drew from their own professional networks to ensure as wide a capture as possible of programs on offer.

Overall, of the nine DET regions across Victoria, only two were not forthcoming with information. However, it was felt that with the abundance of information collected on mentoring initiatives in all other regions, it would be sufficient and representative across the state. Most types of mentoring opportunities available were covered by more than one example each—from the large purpose-designed fully funded program, to experienced teachers paid a few hours a week for their mentoring time, to free peer-to-peer mentoring within network groups (see Appendix). Data was analysed using a thematic analysis.

Findings

Mentoring initiatives for early childhood teachers across Victoria vary in program characteristics. This analysis focused on program goals and purposes, membership and recruitment, facilitation and procedures and infrastructure. There is also consideration of the challenges and constraints faced by the programs. Some of the initiatives were geographically located close to members, while others were located in only one place to serve teachers across the state.

Goals and purposes

The mentoring initiatives investigated here had a range of goals and purposes, ranging from the broad to the specific.

They included:

- developing knowledge and skills perceived not to be covered during initial teacher training
- to provide mentoring through linking into a network rather than on an individual basis
- as a way to support and value staff
- to disseminate information
- to lift the quality of services
- to support staff in the implementation of the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2011)—a curriculum framework to guide practice, and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011)—standards that set a benchmark for early childhood education and care
- to offer a space where discussion about topical, localised issues could be shared
- to offer personalised support with practice issues such as planning and setting the environment
- to offer a network where those working across the sector could come together and work towards better outcomes for children and families
- to support work with vulnerable children, as staff were not engaging with the associated written professional learning materials.

Only three programs were specifically geared towards new graduate teachers. All other initiatives included either all early childhood teachers in local services, or cross-sectorial membership. Of the three programs for 'new to the profession' early childhood teachers, two were based on goals of assisting these new teachers to acquire the necessary skills to manage kindergarten services effectively. These two initiatives saw themselves as being able to further enhance the skills and knowledge that the teachers had developed during their training, focusing on helping them understand the complexities of managing a service. These programs were designed as complementing what was seen as the 'theoretical' knowledge gained from pre-service teacher preparation courses with what one coordinator described as 'the actual practical knowledge and the day-to-day'.

According to one coordinator of a program targeting new teachers, graduates could be expected to have the basic teaching skills in working with children, but struggled with the challenges of leadership and running a service:

... Probably, second year in, we realised they [new graduates] were coming in with a significant shortage in skills in relation to dealing with the complexities of looking after a kindergarten service. Certainly, their skills and abilities in dealing with the children were quite up to standards, but it's in relation to all the additional tasks that are involved—family relationship building, dealing with committees, and all that sort of stuff [such as] filling out a variety of departmental

information, completing their anticipated data/confirmed data, transition statements (they knew about them, but what did they look like, time involved, completing them), the skills in building relationships with the families to get those statements completed correctly ... generally, the nuts and bolts of looking after a stand-alone kindergarten service. They come out of university with 4 weeks' fieldwork in the last year, versus walking in and having the responsibility of managing the other staff at the service ...

... So they're not only coming out [to the centres/ services] as just early education teachers but also as leaders/supervisors of other staff—which could be quite challenging especially if an assistant has been in the service for a significant number of years and has built quite significant relationships with the community that they're in and also the other staff members—there can be some issues involved with that. So, we identified that some of the graduates who were coming to us didn't have any idea [about] what's involved [in running a service].

The other initiative specially designed for new or 'professionally isolated' early childhood teachers, was built on increasing their access to mentoring relationships which were based around discussions on pedagogy and developing effective practice.

Many of the networks run by local councils and cluster managements, while providing opportunities for networking, information sharing and discussion of ideas, at the same time also supported management functions. For example, participants in one initiative which encompassed a range of early childhood professionals as members, identified their reasons for attending group meetings as including: being able to talk about Maternal and Child Health cases; establishing a network for monitoring children and families; and being able to find out in advance the number of childcare places needed the following year. Thus it seems that the meetings for this group were focused on other issues, not solely on mentoring processes.

Other programs included aspects of staff monitoring and assessment. In one program, a senior teacher performed both mentoring and appraisal roles. In another program, mentee participants were identified as new teachers who were 'not coping', based on discussions with the teachers themselves, and feedback from families and committees.

Recruitment and membership

Three mentoring initiatives had more formal recruitment processes for members, but these all related to teachers new to the early childhood profession. One of these programs, run by a local government authority, was very distinctive as the mentees, once accepted, taught alongside experienced teachers and did not have their own groups of children to teach, similar to an apprenticeship

model with the mentees being guaranteed a full teaching position the following year. The kindergarten coordinator described how it worked:

... we want to give them that year of practical, on-the-job foundation. And then following that, the year after, we can then appoint [them to] a role in a kindergarten, having their own group as such. But in the mentoring year [first year] they haven't actually got their own group, they'd be partnering with another teacher, they're co-teaching a group. There's also some scenarios where they float around our services ... so they're getting to see a range of practices and on-the-job skills from quite different teachers.

As noted above, some groups had a cross-sectorial membership whereas others were restricted to early childhood teachers only. In fact, five of the 14 initiatives charted in this report had cross-sectorial membership. The choice of membership was closely tied to the goals and purposes of the program. For all these programs, mentors were recruited on the basis of their experience in the early childhood field. One program varied by choosing mentors, not on years of experience, but by whether or not the person was deemed an 'effective communicator'.

Some initiatives had used 'gate-keeping' as part of the organisation of their membership. In one program, kindergarten coordinators acted as gatekeepers. For the fully online forum initiative, the forum moderator acted in this role. Entry into other programs was mediated by the criteria set for entry as decided by the DET (i.e. Children's Services Advisors and Quality Improvement and Learning Transition Managers in regions) for programs they funded. Other initiatives were sector or location specific (geographical or by cluster), or determined by the local council (in consultation with the teachers themselves and feedback from families).

Facilitation and procedures

All initiatives had either a designated facilitator or someone who drove or championed the program. This varied from a paid designated position to a task that someone took responsibility for, but without acknowledged allocation in their workload. Some of the initiatives offered support to mentors through meetings or online forums. For one mentor the role of staff appraisal was incorporated into her mentoring role. Only two of the programs held training for the designated mentors/coaches. Two programs had resources, one of which was a generic set of resources that all members received, and the other provided resources 'as required'.

Some type of regular contact was a feature of all mentoring initiatives, however the exact nature of this varied across programs. The variations included individual phone conversations and emails, group meetings, contact on demand, and scheduled contact such as monthly for the life of the initiative. One mentor described what she saw as the value of email and phone contact:

I think the ability to email, [make] phone calls, make sure you're available—it means that little things don't become big things. Even though it might be more ideal if you're out there more frequently in the centres, the way the technology works, we can actually keep in contact without actually physically being there all the time.

Face-to-face meetings were a popular choice of how these programs operated, with the meetings varying from one annual meeting, one meeting per term, to meetings every couple of weeks. Some of these meetings had guest speakers, while others concentrated on airing and addressing issues raised by members. Meeting times were either at set times (day or night), or varied so that all members had the opportunity to attend at some time. These meetings were often facilitated by someone in a mentor or facilitator role, however one group alternated the venues and roles between the group members.

Site visits to centres also appeared as features of some programs and varied from one annual visit, one per term, or every six–eight weeks. Visit activities could include observations, modelling practice and behaviours, and/or discussions about practice and the implementation of the VEYLDF and the NQS. One program manager described how it was left to the mentor's discretion as to how to best use their allocated time:

... there are weeks when she won't have any face-to-face contact with any of the centres, but every third week, she would use up more than five hours to formally visit one of the centres/services in the cluster, meet with the kindergarten teachers and other staff, and provide assistance. Each service/centre is visited at least once a year. Otherwise, the mentor is always available to all staff by phone, email, or through informal meetings at a mutually agreed time.

Online forums were part of some programs, and for one initiative it was the complete mode of contact and communication. Dedicated websites were attached to some programs with forums built into the websites. The moderator of one forum noted that:

There is quite a bit of networking that happens within the group ... it is a particular interest in something or knowledge about something, you know, somebody knows how to get rainwater tanks, or somebody knows how to get a bilge pump, or somebody knows where to get butterflies, and we would put general information on, but they can talk to the person who actually has that information, and get it directly as they need [it].

A major perceived benefit to members of online programs was having an early childhood network to belong to, without the need to travel for meetings.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure of each initiative varied from the in-kind position of facilitator, with workload recognition, to a paid, designated position varying from three hours per week to full time (local government funded). One established program alternated the roles and responsibilities between group members as there was no funding for a facilitator. For three of the mentoring programs, contractors delivered the DET-funded programs. In some local council and cluster manager programs, mentoring was part of position descriptions so there was no extra financial entitlement to this role. In the local government program that employed graduate teachers, described earlier, the mentees were paid a graduate teacher wage. The mentors in that program received no remuneration for their mentoring activities with the graduate teachers; however, they were compensated by having a co-teacher with whom to share their workload. This meant, for example, that they were able to have extra time away from face-to-face teaching, for activities such as planning and professional development.

Another local government authority shouldered the cost of providing informal mentoring to new teachers as part of the cost of providing the services:

As far as the cost is concerned, we weigh up the cost of these graduates failing, not being able to maintain a position in our organisation versus the cost of getting somebody in a few hours a week to give them a hand. We kind of took that cost on the chin, we've got no formal arrangements, and if the money runs out then we stop. So it's a bit of a catch-22, and we do risk leaving those graduates quite vulnerable, we have got some families in some of our communities that have extremely high expectations, and we've got staff in some services [who have been there] for a number of years and [who are] very skilled and experienced and if that staff goes—for one reason or another—we replace them with a graduate, it's quite a daunting process for that individual, so I guess we have to put a few of those considerations together when we look into what we do.

Challenges and constraints

Across all the mentoring initiatives there were a number of factors that impacted on the programs, limiting their reach or longevity. For programs that were funded there were cessation dates. Some initiatives were restricted in scope. For example, the online forum could only cater for 200 places due to a technical limit. Other programs were only available to staff of particular centres or under cluster managements, or according to geographic location or sector type.

Participation in most initiatives was voluntary and this caused a fluctuation in numbers, especially where meetings were held outside paid work hours. Teachers found it difficult to attend meetings due to a lack of

time. One coordinator described the difficulties faced by teachers wanting to attend meetings that were held on weekday afternoons:

Not for the fact that they don't want to come, but that they haven't got the resources ... A lot of people talk about offering financial resources but I think the relief just isn't there. Especially with the new framework that's been put in place now, they have so much extra to do outside of their normal work hours—this [mentoring group] is just probably another 'something else'. I think for everyone working [in child care], how do we make things available for people without putting too much pressure on them and their lack of resources, really. So, like I said, it's all right to say, 'I can financially compensate or something [for the relief teacher]' but then there's no relief teacher—that's the problem.

Another coordinator expressed her frustration with the difficulties of running a network program when potential but busy participants did not want to come to 'another meeting':

I think it has the potential. It absolutely has the potential. If people who were a bit more enthusiastic came along, it definitely has the potential. Council was providing myself, a preschool teacher, and my other colleagues—there's good qualified people there from whom they could gather information and get support and mentoring but it just wasn't really cutting it ... It would have been great if we could have had more members.

In the programs where a mentor/facilitator was funded this was often for insufficient hours than were needed to undertake the complex role and to cover all centre locations. One mentor, who was paid for her work, noted the voluntary nature of much of the mentoring that happens in early childhood:

The unpaid rate in early childhood is high and you always work a lot more hours than you are paid for ... so it is nice [to be paid] ... I feel that it is a bit of a recognition of the fact that I have been doing some of this work, that it is recognised, that yes, it is time consuming, and I am now able to offer more to staff. I mean, I tried to do as much as I could before, but I mean I am not any saint or anything, I mean, obviously my centre's work came first, and I have a family, and all of that ... I can't really justify spending my whole life supporting others without it being part of my paid work.

Discussion

This research found a variety of forms of mentoring happening in Victoria. These ranged from structured and relatively well-resourced programs integrated into formal employment arrangements, to spontaneous

'coming together' in online discussions. In addition, both mentoring program participants and coordinators saw mentoring as taking a range of different forms and having a variety of objectives. A common theme, from both coordinators and participants in the various programs, was that mentoring was important for both beginning and experienced early childhood teachers, as well as other professionals, especially in a time of major reforms. A few of the programs were specifically targeted at newly graduated teachers. While it was considered that these beginning teachers 'knew the children's stuff—because that's what they've been taught', they were seen as particularly needing support in developing skills in the day-to-day running and management of a centre. Coordinators of those programs targeted at new graduates also perceived working with families as a challenge for these teachers.

While several of the programs have been, or are in the process of being evaluated, the majority have not undergone formal evaluation processes. It needs to be acknowledged that the dominant voices in our research are of those who ran the programs, either as managers, or session coordinators, coaches, etc. Only occasionally have we been able to access feedback from participants, either mentees or mentors. This means that reports on successes and challenges of the programs are from a certain perspective, as is the identification of mentoring needs and program aims. An example is the emphasis in the programs for graduate teachers on developing skills in 'running the centre', based on an assumption that the fundamentals of teaching practice and working with children 'have been learnt' at university. It is interesting to compare the assumption that mentoring in basic teaching practice is not a priority for new graduates, with findings from the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers* which we implemented. Participating mentees were surveyed on their expectations of the program and what they hoped to gain from it. While there was some mention of looking for support in developing practical skills in running centres, overwhelmingly mentees were looking for support in developing their teaching practice, working with families and meeting the challenges of recent reforms (Nolan, Morrissey & Dumenden, 2013).

There were several programs where mentoring was associated in some way with processes other than mentoring support, including monitoring or appraisal by management. In one program, the mentor carried out both mentoring and appraisal roles. In another program, new teachers who were 'not coping' were identified to be participants. While these may have been effective and efficient ways of rolling out these programs, maximising the use of limited resources, it is pertinent to consider whether it is better to ensure some distance between management processes of monitoring and program evaluation, and mentoring activities. For example, all

three mentee cohorts who took part in the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers* appreciated the fact that their mentors were from outside their own workplaces. In their opinion, this professional distance allowed them to be honest in their discussions with their mentors about their development as a professional. Trust was built between each mentor and mentee, with mentees very much seeing mentors as 'on their side' and working in their best interests.

Comments from two of the participants in another mentoring program suggest that without that distance, mentoring can be perceived as intimidating and perhaps seen in part as an evaluative activity by management:

One feels less intimidated in networking meetings than in a one-to-one mentoring situation where the mentor comes to the centre to do the mentoring.

Networking meetings are less threatening than formal mentoring arrangements.

It is interesting to contrast these comments with participant feedback from the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers* where preliminary evaluation data indicated that mentees valued mentor visits to their centres as a highly supportive practice (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b).

The programs reviewed in this research used a range of structures to provide mentoring. They ranged from 'democratic' networks of practitioners, who made decisions on their own organisation and agendas, through to management-instituted arrangements, including employment conditions. Different strategies and approaches were also used, from open online discussions to informal meetings and discussion, to instructional coaching. Decision making about mentoring goals, and even about participation itself, also varied. Some programs were voluntary, some open to all. In others, participants were selected on the basis of certain criteria, or were required to participate in mentoring.

One of the principles for a successful mentoring program identified in the literature is that each mentoring relationship is unique, and that mentoring programs should allow for individualised arrangements in order to fit each participant's developmental needs. It is useful to remember this when looking at different mentoring programs. For example, one program involved quite directive instructional strategies, in a centre-based program in low socioeconomic areas. One of the coaches commented that:

It's more than just mentoring because I'm there a lot of the time—modelling behaviour, modelling practice for educators ... so that they can learn to use that in the service with the children ... [I am] influencing and changing the educators' practice: 'Do what I am doing'.

This project had not been formally evaluated, although the project team described a number of positive changes in

services that participated in this program. However, the approaches of this program were quite different from those used in the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers* where mentees were required to develop their own goals, to be achieved through an action research project. Mentors were encouraged to support mentees through this process by encouraging them to build on their own particular strengths, engage in reflective practice and develop individual approaches to teaching based on their own pedagogical philosophies and values. Findings from the formal evaluation of that project indicated a high level of satisfaction from both mentees and mentors (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b).

The literature has identified the mentoring relationship to be of crucial importance, particularly in mentoring programs for beginning teachers. The literature has also identified that the provision of time as a resource is essential for successful mentoring. This is reflected in the comments of many of those running mentoring programs in Victoria, where teachers' busy workloads and lack of time impeded the success of mentoring programs, particularly those involving network meetings requiring teachers to attend outside their working hours. One facilitator described the challenges she faced:

... to actually get people there was like drawing teeth ... and they weren't really forming any network bonds ... Because they were just so busy already. The thing I heard all the time was: 'It's just another meeting. Why do I have to come to another meeting?'

The challenge of resourcing mentoring was a common theme across all programs. Even the comparatively well-resourced programs faced limitations and an uncertain future. In addition, one of the most consistent messages coming through was a reluctance to continue the provision of unpaid or uncompensated informal mentoring on the part of coordinators and practitioners, in the interests of work-life balance. One possible approach that may assist in addressing this issue is the integration of a mentoring component in staff roles that provides time, reward or compensation. For example, in one program the kindergarten coordinators accepted a mentoring role as part of their job. The employment of a new graduate teacher to work alongside an experienced teacher in centres gave more time for both to engage in mentoring activity. In this way, the extra duty of mentoring for the experienced teacher was compensated for by the support of having a graduate teacher to share the teaching responsibilities. However, how the appraisal role is conducted in situations like this needs further thought. Our research indicates that there is a place for different mentoring functions, purposes and approaches. For example, mentoring by a supervising teacher on placement or an 'apprenticeship' model is about mentoring in the workplace and includes a supervisory/appraisal function, whereas there is also a place for mentoring by someone outside a teacher's

workplace, perhaps serving a different purpose, as part of a community of practice.

The literature indicates that training and support for mentors is crucial for successful mentoring. It could also be asked whether mentoring, either as a mentor, mentee or member of a community of learners, should be regarded as an integral component of a teacher's role, not as a burdensome addition to their existing workload, but as an important responsibility with an appropriate allocation of time and resources. Most teachers already informally undertake mentoring, such as for pre-service teachers on professional experience placement, working with new teachers at their centres, or as educational leaders. Most, however, receive no training or support to undertake these roles, and we have little knowledge of how effectively they do so.

Conclusion

Effective mentoring reduces teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) and enhances outcomes for children (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b). Therefore, we could regard teachers' professional lives as moving along a mentoring continuum, from being mentored as a pre-service and graduating teacher, to eventually becoming experienced mentor-teachers themselves. Identifying the changing mentoring needs and roles of teachers, and providing resources to support them through these career stages, may be a profitable investment. The new mandated role of educational leader in every centre may also provide an opportunity for establishing mentoring as an essential activity for early childhood professionals, and for developing mentoring skills in experienced practitioners.

The following questions have arisen from our research which explored the types of mentoring programs on offer across the state of Victoria. We offer these for consideration:

- How can the mentoring needs of beginning teachers best be identified and met?
- Should mentoring always be based on a mentee's self-identified goals, or is there a place for goals imposed by management, regulatory authorities etc.?
- Can ill-devised mentoring programs actually create negative outcomes, such as by: undermining mentee confidence in their own competence; 'tagging' program participants as incompetent or 'not coping'; encouraging the adoption of 'quick fixes' or 'one-size-fits-all' solutions?
- How might mentoring of pre-service teachers, such as in professional experience programs and internships, fit with a conception of mentoring as an essential activity for early childhood professionals? What part might higher education institutions play in mentoring for early childhood professionals in Victoria?

As this study has found, and as confirmed by the literature, there are now other alternative mentoring structures (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000), which challenge the top-down, unidirectional models of the past. These structures are driven by the social changes experienced within the education field such as 'reciprocal teaching and learning and the call for mutual trust between mentors and protégés ... These practices involving mutual learning or collaborative mentorship challenge the conventional view of "other" as the subject, the learner, or the ignorant' (Mullen & Kealy, 2000, p. 3). We hope our questions can promote further thinking about mentoring within the early childhood field, and what needs to be considered to shape mentoring for the future.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Mentoring programs: The nature of the sample

DET regions	Program type	Aspects
Barwon South Western Eastern Metropolitan Hume Gippsland Grampians Loddon Mallee Northern Metropolitan Southern Metropolitan Western Metropolitan	<p>Large, purpose-designed, fully funded program</p>  <p>Free peer-to-peer mentoring within network groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Purpose ▪ Aims and expectations ▪ Membership and recruitment ▪ Features ▪ Procedures ▪ Gatekeepers ▪ Infrastructure ▪ Perceived benefits ▪ Factors impeding reach and longevity