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| Title | Learning beyond mentoring: the Singapore experience |
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| Source | <i>International Journal of Educational Management</i> , 16(4), 185-189 |
| Published by | Emerald (www.emeraldinsight.com/) |

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Learning beyond mentoring: the Singapore experience

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Keywords

Singapore, Mentoring, Teachers, Networking, Learning, Workplace learning

Abstract

In Singapore, mentoring was the key feature of a development strategy for aspiring principals for one and a half decades. Many of the former participant protégés are currently practising principals in schools. This paper reports an exploratory study that sought to identify and examine the main learning source of these principals beyond mentoring. It is suggested that there is active networking for learning relationships at work among fellow principals. The principals create, seize and promote opportunities to improve their on-the-job practice through learning from the unstructured learning relationships at work. The formal principalship preparation programme that they attended emerges as a breeding ground for the initiation of informal learning relationships at work. Beyond formal mentoring, the principals appear to lead their own learning in collaboration with their peers in education.

Introduction

Mentoring has been widely recognized as a means of enhancing professional or organisational development (Kram, 1985; Caldwell and Carter, 1993) and in the field of educational management, the mentoring of school principals or headteachers is gaining prominence (Daresh, 2001; Bush, 1999; Low *et al.*, 1994).

The Singapore experience in mentoring was sustained over a period of one and a half decades. Designed as a development strategy for potential future principals since 1984, mentoring involved the pairing of each protégé to a mentor-principal. Mentoring was incorporated as the key feature of the Diploma in Education Administration (DEA) programme, a full-time one-academic-year programme for the principal preparation of selected vice-principals. The Ministry of Education handpicked the mentor-principals as worthy role models for future principals in the Singapore school system. Each participant protégé in the mentoring programme was formally attached to the mentor for two one-month periods. During this school attachment, the protégés learned by “shadowing” the mentor in the mentor’s school.

Many of the former participant protégés in the Singapore mentoring programme are now school principals. Research (Lim, 2001) has been conducted to explore the learning and practice of school management, as perceived by school principals who had the opportunity to learn through mentoring. This paper focuses on aspects of the findings of this research that are pertinent to learning sources outside mentoring. While the mentoring experience could contribute towards the learning and practice of educational management, are there other

sources of learning that could be of significance? Beyond mentoring, what is the key learning source of the principals?

As such a study was exploratory in nature and served to generate new knowledge in a specific area, the strategy of enlisting the maximum possible number of principals could help ensure more accurate findings and convincing conclusion. Prior to data collection, it is an expected requirement to seek official approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE). The MOE granted permission to reach out to only a maximum of 70 percent (or 48 principals) of the population of 68 secondary school principals who were former participants of the mentoring programme, citing practical constraints as the reason for imposing the restriction. A random sample of 70 percent of the available population was thus invited to participate in this study. For this study, the response rate was 85 percent, that is, 41 out of the 48 principals (in the random sample) who were approached participated in this study. Every participant was requested to grant a personal interview after having completed a self-administered questionnaire. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to list the sources of learning beyond mentoring, with reference to their actual school practice. The face-to-face interview complemented the questionnaire in helping to provide the intricate details that were difficult to convey in the questionnaire method.

“Fellow principals” as key learning source outside mentoring

The learning sources outside mentoring were identified by 41 principals. Six categories of such sources of learning could be identified from the interview data. The six categories were:

- 1 fellow principals;
- 2 past experiences;
- 3 on-the-job experiences;



The International Journal of Educational Management
16/4 [2002] 185–189

© MCB UP Limited
[ISSN 0951-354X]
[DOI 10.1108/09513540210432164]

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- 4 courses;
- 5 professional literature; and
- 6 supervisors.

The number and percentage of principals with respect to the learning sources outside mentoring are displayed in Table I.

Fellow principals were peers of the principals. They could be former classmates who were in the same DEA cohort as the principals, or could be principals of other schools from whom the principals had the opportunity to learn. Past experiences were personal experiences in school or in other educational settings, where they undertook positions of responsibility. The organisational positions could include subject co-ordinator, senior subject teacher, senior assistant, head of department, specialist inspector and vice-principal. On-the-job experiences referred to the source of learning that was available in school while the principals were practising principals. The category “courses” included formal workshops, conferences, seminars, briefings and training courses. Books or reading materials were categorised under professional literature. Supervisors were the inspectors of schools or the group senior principals (now called cluster superintendents) who were the principals’ reporting officers. They were people above the principals in the organisational hierarchy.

The principals had indicated that they had practised aspects of school management learned from other sources. The category of learning source most frequently cited by the principals was “fellow principals”. This is elaborated below.

Networking for learning relationships at work

This section reports the mode of learning volunteered readily by principals when they talked about what they had learned from “fellow principals”. Out of 41 principals, 83 percent (or 34 principals) indicated “fellow

Table I

Principals by learning sources outside mentoring

| Learning sources outside mentoring | Number | Percent |
|------------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Fellow principals | 34 | 83 |
| Past experiences | 25 | 61 |
| On-the-job experiences | 22 | 54 |
| Courses | 14 | 34 |
| Professional literature | 6 | 15 |
| Supervisors | 4 | 10 |

principals” as a learning source outside mentoring. The principals form learning relationships at work with other “fellow principals”. Features of friendship, collaboration and mutual learning could be found in such learning relationships among the principals at work. These “fellow principals” or peers need not be, but could be, participants of the same mentoring cohort. They could be other principals whom they met on formal or informal occasions. They could be principals working in schools sited at the same location. These fellow principals could also be peers with whom they interact at meetings or workshops and develop learning relationships. The following examples from different principals are presented below to illustrate the features of friendship, collaboration and mutual learning in the learning relationships at work among principals.

The first quotation was taken from a principal who had suggested the initiation of a “very good”, “very critical” and “very strong friendship bond” while they were in the programme. They could “share ideas” and “tips and pointers along the way”. They could meet on festive occasions, make arrangements to “support” one another’s school functions, and “help” those in trouble. It was also suggested that the principals “expand” this network as they “build up rapport as friends along the way” with other principals who are not their classmates. In developing the friendship, they “forge bonds and help each other along the way”:

Many in my network are from DEA [Diploma In Education Administration Programme]. We link up with other principals, and we build up our network. As a new principal, the DEA network is very good, very critical . . . You can share tips and pointers along the way. We can always share ideas. We make it a point to meet at least once a term. For my DEA [group], every Chinese New Year we had a *lohhei* [Chinese New Year Dish]. And we always make it a point to support each other’s Speech Day – If there’s a clash in days, then we’ll say, “OK, you attend this, this, this . . .” and we network to send flowers, etc. When someone is in trouble, word gets around, “Hey! Can we help in certain ways?” – That’s where the DEA comes in. The nine months we had build up a very strong friendship bond. Another level will be when we meet at meetings, courses, workshops, we build up rapport as friends along the way and we expand our network. In the process, we forge bonds and help each other along the way.

The close DEA friendship could allow them to “cry on each other’s shoulders” when they are “desperate”. The learning relationships at work provide “psychological emotional support for the work” principals do. There

could be establishment of “a very close emotional link” in helping one another at work. They “bring up issues and seek each other’s opinion”. The requests for “favour” or “help” from these principal friends could be made through informal meetings or telephone calls. It was suggested that these relationships help the principals “continue to learn”:

Make friends – networking. We have a lunch group consisting of principals in the area where the school is – a network. But our DEA clique, up till today, is still meeting regularly. Because of that, when we are desperate, we do cry on each other’s shoulders. When we meet, we do bring up issues and seek each other’s opinion. When I’m in a fix and I cannot handle it, I normally look up one or two of them and ask, “What’s your opinion? Can you give some ideas?” We take the sessions as psychological emotional support for the work we do ... We sort of establish a very close emotional link. We get to know and we try and help.

Many of them [friends] are my former DEA colleagues ... I go out to see my friends – principals of the other schools; [know them] through my DEA contacts, or during principals’ meetings and all that. So I call so-and-so. “How are you? Hey, do me a favour. Can I see your programs? Can I have this?” You must do that. You must be thick-skinned. Can’t be helped. And I think many of them are willing to help – you cannot just be sitting down, waiting for things to happen – you continue to learn and you must always learn.

Friendship is an informal relationship that could be developed to support people who are working or doing things as a group.

Friendship formed for collaborative learning is a developmental relationship. There could be arrangements to meet for regular meals, outings, and special occasions. The DEA group could serve as the “first support group”. There is also sharing of “plights, pleasures, depressions” and “successes and failures” with principals outside the DEA group. In sharing, they “learn from one another”. They seek opportunities in meetings or over meals to form learning relationships. It is evident that the networking is useful for support and learning.

Networking with my own fellow principals has helped me learn a lot because I don’t have to be in a very good school or I don’t have to be in a terrible school to learn all the problems that they have and all the things that they are doing. My DEA group ... we are still together. We just had dinner last night. We try and come together once a term. And then, of course, when somebody moves house, somebody upgrades and gets a bigger place and all that, we always come together ... In fact, we went on a cruise to celebrate our XX anniversary [Laughter] ... So that’s my first

support group. I also have networking with other principals – like X Zone Sports Council, for example. After that, we sat down for lunch because hosting schools provide lunches, you see ... In informal networking, we share all our plights, pleasures, depressions and all that. Our successes and failures, we share also. We learn from one another.

The following two quotes highlighted the extension of the DEA network to other “fellow principals” working in the same location. The regular meals or “working lunch” with “principal friends” could serve as a platform for sharing, consulting and learning together at work. Mutual “help” and “support” exist among these “principal friends” at work:

I consult some of my fellow principals ... I’ve got very good principal friends who are willing to share. One of the things I do is, every X [specific day of the week], like this coming X [specific day of the week] 12 o’clock, I’ll be going for lunch with this X [location] group of principals – because we are all operating in X [location] ... There are as many as eight to 13 of us. Every X [specific day of the week], without fail, we sit, and we eat and we talk. I get to learn what they do. And that’s my way – consulting my principal friends for advice. My DEA participants, for a start, I already got X [number] of them because there were X [number], so X [number] principal friends.

When you have a network of people, it’s so easy to get help. There may not be anything common between us [DEA participants], but because we were on this [DEA] course, the next time when you need help, or vice versa, to give help. It’s easier for you to obtain help and perhaps you’re more generous in giving help to that person ... Because if you just call any principal who doesn’t know you, there seems to be this invisible barrier and they tend to get a bit more official than is I think necessary. It’s a bit harder. But if your network is there, and you say, “Hey! I need help here”, they’ll say, “OK”, and go all the way to help you ... There are quite a lot of schools here, and we meet every [specific day] for a working lunch [Laughter] ... Sometimes we do miss the lunch. But we do make it a point to be together and that’s where we discuss the latest instruction, the latest circular ... And that is very helpful. A lot of support.

An illustrative quote given below illuminates the extent to which sharing and learning took place among fellow principals informally over the phone, during tea breaks at meetings, or at meals. Finding out one another’s progress at work and making arrangements for school visits could be ways to “help” one another and to “learn and share from each other”.

Let's say I have problems in implementation or carrying out certain policies or whatever, I'll ring up my fellow principals from my DEA batch to ask about them, or sometimes informal meetings or formal meetings over tea, "Hey! This policy or this thing, I have a problem like that, what did you do in your schools?" So at least you get the viewpoints of other principals. As a DEA batch, we do meet up once a month actually, as many of us as possible. Because sometimes in our "busyness", all of us – we may not have time to meet. Once a month, if we are able to make it, we'll have a free chit-chat over lunch or over dinner, that kind of thing. What surface basically, I think a lot is on the new initiatives by the ministry. I think these things get us talking and seeing how we help [one another] . . . So we also check with each other, what's the progress – "So how far have you carried out this initiative?" You know, we also want to be aware that, at least, certain schools are moving forward. And if certain schools are moving quite ahead, then maybe we should go and visit . . . I could just pick up the phone, "Hey, how about visiting your school?" and learn from their experience . . . So in this way we do learn and share from each other.

The above section depicts the features of friendship, collaboration and mutual learning in the learning relationships formed by principals at work. In casting a wider network of learning at work, it is apparent that the principals do not confine themselves to contacts within their former course mates. It is evident that the principals create, seize and promote opportunities to improve their practice of school management through learning from informal, unstructured learning relationships at work. They practise what they have learned beyond formal mentoring.

Continuous workplace learning in developing learning organisations

Learning relationships at work could provide a form of continuous workplace learning. The findings indicate that learning mattered to the participants. Learning relationships at work indicated the need and practice of ongoing professional development. The principals related to one another. They learned. And as they learned, they related. The process could empower the principals to work individually and with others towards more perceptive practice. The learning relationships at work offered the principals ways to increase learning by sharing with one another. The expanding corpus of information in their job required the principals to learn how to learn, and one way was through the learning relationships at work. The speed and variety of current

information that was exchanged in such learning relationships at work could be timely in the practice of school management. It facilitated the on-time delivery of information in the exchange of knowledge and the need for continuous learning. The learning relationships at work promoted self-management of the need for continuous learning. It put into question the necessity to have "mentorship serve as the foundation for ongoing in-service education programs for more experienced head-ships as well" (Daresh and Playko, 1992, p. 151).

Learning relationships at work could help the principals cope with continuous change. The learning relationships at work could help the principals to face the demands and ambiguities that accompanied their daily work, and to cope with or lead for change. The network served as a possible platform for the principals to present issues, seek clarification and discuss practices, and share problems without fear of penalties or worry about inadequacies. It could provide confidence to principals during periods of change and uncertainty. In such a network, they were more likely to learn to at least survive in adversity, if not flourish.

The establishment of a network of contacts and learning relationships at work signifies that mentoring could contribute towards developing learning organisations. The principals' former formal mentoring experience has evolved into an informal pervasive practice of learning relationships at work. Senge (1990, p. 3) states that work has to be a continual process of learning; people in learning organisations "are continually learning how to learn together". Marquardt and Engel (1993) identify learning organisations as one of the 14 global mega trends that will have a large impact on the workplace and human resource development. There is a need for the focus to extend beyond individual learning, towards a "macro view of learning and learn more about how the organisation as a system learns" (Marquardt and Engel, 1993, p. 295). School heads could demonstrate leadership or model behaviour to meet the challenges of schools ahead by becoming the "head learner" (Barth, 1990, p. 72) as well as playing the role of headteacher in the organisation. With regard to the building of a learning organisation, it would appear that the time has come for principals to lead their own learning in collaboration with their peers in the education arena.

Conclusion

There is an active networking for learning relationships at work among principals who have the opportunity to learn through

structured mentoring. The formal principalship preparation programme that they attended emerges as a convergent ground for the initiation of a divergent learning network of informal learning relationships at work. Fellow principals serve as the main learning source outside mentoring for these principals. There is no attempt to conclude that the participants' perceptions in this study can be generalized to all the principals in Singapore. Further research could examine how well and to what extent the principals who do not have the benefit of formal mentoring fit into such learning networks. Further research could also ascertain the possibility of the emergence of power centres within the education system as an outcome of sustained system-wide instituting of the mentoring programme.

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