

Wellbeing Enhanced: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Build Mentoring Skills and Networks

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This study introduces a dynamic, inquiry-based approach to developing mentoring skills across diverse educational settings, empowering mentors to cultivate networks and competencies for supporting educators' wellbeing, particularly for first year teachers, leaders, and faculty. Focusing on skills like active listening, powerful questioning, using data, and reflective feedback, this approach ensures that mentoring is mentee-driven, responding to individual unique needs. The study will provide examples of how these skills can be applied in real-world mentoring relationships. Our conceptual framework draws on work that integrates Bloom's Taxonomy of Inquiry with collaborative reflection. These theories underline the development of critical thinking and reflective practices within mentoring. The inquiry-based model encourages mentors to ask probing, open-ended questions to foster deeper, thoughtful dialogue that nurtures mentee growth. By centering on reflection, feedback, and inquiry, this framework highlights the transformative power of mentoring for both educators and administrators in their professional journeys. This qualitative study uses a combination of observation, interviews, and analysis of mentoring session data, including templates and conferencing techniques. It examines specific instructional strategies such as wait time, questioning, feedback, and dialogue which influence mentee development. The research sample includes first-year teachers, principal interns, superintendents, and university faculty who engaged in structured mentoring with experienced mentors. The goal is to assess how these mentoring practices contribute to critical thinking, skill development, and overall professional growth. The study's findings demonstrate that mentors who utilize an inquiry-based approach significantly enhance mentees' critical thinking, reflective practices, and professional performance. The research also underscores the importance of creating clear communication norms, maintaining confidentiality, reflective practice, use of data, communication skills, and robust feedback loops. These elements are essential for mentee developmental growth and creating a supportive and productive mentoring network, ensuring continuous learning and wellbeing for both mentors and mentees throughout the process.

Keywords: Inquiry-based approach, mentoring skills, collaborative reflection, induction

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Introduction

While there is no single definition of wellbeing, it generally includes positive emotion, life satisfaction and fulfillment, and the overall positive level of functioning of an individual (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Wellbeing can also be defined as understanding how people feel and how individuals' function (Jarden & Roache, 2023). Mentoring, as a formal or informal act, can support individual's emotional wellbeing during significant life experiences such as job transitions, family changes, or other major life stages. This study outlines the foundational role and connection of mentoring to an individual's wellbeing by examining

several mentoring programs in the context of K12 education through university settings. Positive mentoring relationships are essential to one's wellbeing during times of change and transition and as individuals seek new levels of mastery and opportunities for self-growth during unknown or uncertain times (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019). The mentoring relationship itself necessitates personal connection, bonding, mutual interest, and opportunities to build trust to achieve explicit goals, skills, abilities, and meaningful growth. Through experience and dialogue, mentors provide guidance, support, and intervention as they model and promote positive mentee wellbeing (Kutsyuruba & Kochan, 2024; Orsini, 2023).

Literature Review

Mentee Driven, Individualized Mentoring

In recent years, mentoring practices in academic and professional settings have shifted from traditional, mentor-led models toward more mentee-driven, individualized approaches. This evolution aligns with a growing recognition of the importance of empowering mentees to shape their own development, which leads to more personalized and equitable mentoring relationships. At the core of individualized mentoring is the principle that the learner should identify their goals and articulate their professional aspirations. By allowing mentees to define their needs and objectives, mentoring relationships become more tailored and relevant to individual growth trajectories (Sharma et al., 2021). Mentee-driven mentoring also emphasizes the mentee's active engagement in the mentoring process. According to Sharma et al. (2021), self-directed mentees are more likely to seek out feedback, pursue learning opportunities, and assume responsibility for their own growth. This proactive stance not only accelerates skill development but also fosters confidence and resilience. Mentors, too, benefit from these dynamic relationships, often gaining fresh perspectives and professional renewal.

Skills Acquisition

A trusted listener is somebody who respects confidentiality and listens attentively. As a skilled listener, the mentor also builds trust within the relationship, and this leads to the development of transformational learning. Transforming what we know into classroom practice involves looking at the complexity of teaching. Taylor and Cranton (2012) state, "learning is a process of examining, questioning, and revising those perceptions" [of teaching] (p. 5). Burt (2019) states that there are four modes of listening: attention, inquiry, observation, and use of self. These modes of listening contribute to the listener's understanding and the speaker's awareness. By carefully listening, one will be better able to link questions together and cocreate a dialogue which can then lead to reflection. According to Caplan (2003), a survey of 339 organizations indicated that the three most popular training modules focused on active listening, questioning, and providing feedback. Zachary and Fain (2022) also agree that active listening, questioning, and providing feedback are important, and they further discuss how reflective feedback is naturally built into listening and questioning strategies.

These strategies are used to determine what kind of data to collect or analyze depending upon the mentee's needs and area of focus determined by the mentee. It is important that the mentee determines and defines what kind of data is to be collected. An example would be time on task. What the teacher thinks regarding time on task might differ from what the mentor thinks. It is

important that the terms and types of data to be collected are clearly understood by both (Horn & Metler-Armijo, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

The overarching framework based on Sullivan and Glanz (2013) focuses on assessment of the effectiveness of our individual mentoring programs. Sullivan and Glanz's (2013) approach to giving feedback is grounded in being open to exploring and challenging our beliefs, focusing on open communication that is deeply reflective and collaborative, and leads to thoughtful and intentional change. The type of feedback that Sullivan and Glanz (2013) describe is one that is mirrored in assessment cycles used in K-12 schools every day. These authors make a case for thoughtfully examining the differences in "supervision" versus "evaluation" processes. Sullivan and Glanz (2013) challenge each of us to examine our own philosophy of education and consider how these assessment processes are rooted in historical perspectives in education, such as bureaucratic and democratic movements of supervision, scientific supervision, supervision as leadership, clinical supervision, and standards-based supervision. The perspective we use to give feedback is called "reflective clinical supervision" (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013, p. 118). This cycle has four parts: time to conduct a planning conference, time spent observing, time for holding a feedback conference, and time spent together in collaborative reflection. Key to our work in moving our individual mentoring programs forward has been the use of this collaborative reflective cycle. Next, we will discuss the incorporation of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018) in integrating wellness themes into our mentoring programs. Searby (2024) introduced the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018) in her forward to the edited book by Kutsyuruba and Kochan (2024). The PERMA model has six components: P=positive emotions, E=engagement, R=relationships, M=meaning, A=achievement, and V=vitality/health (Searby, 2024). In reviewing the PERMA components, Cabrera and Donaldson (2024) explore the historical perspectives from which the model was created. The PERMA model is a result of the work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) which focused on "grounding the positive psychology approach in science and empirical research" (Cabrera & Donaldson, 2024, p. 510).

Methodology

Our research approach draws from Sullivan and Glanz's (2013) "reflective clinical supervision" cycle. The reflective clinical supervision cycle includes sharing assessment data and asking for specific feedback (planning conference); examining data (the observation); providing specific feedback (feedback conference), and group reflection on the feedback (collaborative reflection). This process initiates changes based on this reflective

and collaborative process. Limitations to the methodology include focusing on hindsight bias (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990) and inaccuracies in recall (Cooper et al., 1978). The entire cycle demonstrates thoughtful implementation of Chase's (2003) direction to "listen for gaps, silences, or contradictions" (p. 289).

The Teacher Induction Program (TIP)

The Teacher Induction Program is for the beginning teacher mentoring program. A mentor is one who is trusted, respects confidentiality, and listens attentively. This role is essential to the relationship with the mentee in developing a sense of wellbeing and transforming the mentee's teaching practices (Huling-Austin, 1992; Zachary & Fain, 2022). A mentor supports the mentee emotionally while solving problem-focused topics which promotes a sense of personal and professional wellbeing (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000).

Mentors provide the assistance and guidance necessary to help novice teachers become successful practitioners and lifelong learners. They encourage teachers to see themselves in their profession as they really are. Mentors guide teachers through self-analysis to self-discovery. Through comprehensive support, mentors help teachers become reflective in their practice and initiate transformative learning (Ambrose, 1987; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

For the beginning teacher mentoring program, an inquiry cycle was used to define the planning conference for classroom observations, data collection, and reflection (NARST, 2018; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). An important component of the inquiry cycle is the planning conference to define what data is to be collected, the subject of which is defined by the mentee. Data collection tools that reflect teacher practice and student behavior were developed by a group of mentors (Horn & Metler-Armijo, 2011). These unbiased tools were used to collect classroom data. Afterwards a reflective conference assists the mentee to analyze and reflect on their own practice to determine the next steps to enhance student success.

During this process, powerful questioning skills are passed on from mentor to mentee and from mentee to their students (Berger, 2014). The mentor and the mentee determine the knowledge level of each question according to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). The response received determines the level of the questioning skill. A higher-level question should be followed by a higher-level thinking response. These questioning skills enhance critical thinking and reflection.

The TIP utilized interview surveys to determine the success of the mentor and the impact on the mentee. The mentor and mentee engaged in constructive conversations that built on each other's skills and experiences to create possible solutions. Incorporating the PERMA model (Searby, 2024) of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement was

easily accepted. What we need to highlight within our program is vitality/health even though our mentees and mentors exhibited wellbeing. Overall, one of the mentees expressed what the majority said: "My mentor gave me confidence and a sense of pride in my teacher practices. I feel good about my teaching and my students" (Personal Interview. Beginning Teacher, April 2020).

Mentoring Future K-12 School Leaders

In our university's graduate program for K-12 principal certification, an approach to mentoring called the co-mentoring circle is utilized. Foundational scholarship that informed the co-mentoring circle process included Kram (1988), developmental relationship at work; Fletcher and Ragins (2007), Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory; Kochan and Pascarelli (2003), mentoring for transforming contexts, communities, and cultures; Kochan and Trimble (2000) and Mullen (2005), definitions of co-mentoring and co-mentoring practices; Dominguez and Kochan (2020), a definition of mentoring; and Zachary and Fischler (2014), a model of how to approach a mentoring conversation.

The co-mentoring circle takes time to develop but once the circle is formed the students (called Interns) report positive results from the co-mentoring experience in the circle. Key to the formation of the co-mentoring circle is forming a thoughtful, confidential, and intentional community among the Interns. In our circle community we first establish group norms (Gibbs, 2006) and a code of confidentiality (Palmer, 2009). Then the Interns examine their own communication style and skills from taking a self-assessment (Alessandra, 2024). Interns also read and study about reflective practice (Arrendondo-Rucinski, 2005; Rodgers, 2002) and trust building practices (Combs et al., 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2007, 2014). Interns study about how to give and receive feedback based on several frameworks, such as Costa and Kallick (1993), Drago-Severson and Blum DeStefano (2016), and Sullivan and Glanz (2013). Three specific trust and circle building activities are also used (Cowin, 2021, 2023). Once the circle is formed, the Interns suggest what topics they would like co-mentoring on. The topics have a wide range and are usually a result of an Intern needing to reflect and debrief on a situation they experienced in their internship. Examples include resolving conflict among students or students and other adults, and conflict in the community that evokes school emergency procedures such as school lock downs. Interns bring their discussion topics to the circle and ask for thoughtful co-mentoring using an inquiry approach in which the co-mentors (the other Interns) ask questions of the Intern submitting the topic. The co-mentoring circle sessions are not a place to give advice but a place of inquiry where the Intern requesting co-mentoring can respond to thoughtful questions from the other co-mentoring circle participants and listen deeply to their own thinking in responding

to the questions. Circle sessions are not used as time to complain but focus on time for inquiry and reflection, leaving the Intern with viable actions and potential solutions.

Wellbeing connections surfaced through the assessment of work done in the co-mentoring circle. Connections to the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018), especially to the components of “positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement” were present (Searby, 2024, pp. viii – ix, citing Norrish, 2015). An area for future planning will be a focus using the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018), especially the component of vitality/health. Based on the topic of leading through conflict and how much emotional toll conflict resolution takes, a focus on wellbeing will be a positive enhancement to our co-mentoring circle program.

Superintendent Mentoring Program

Mentoring provides a natural connection to supporting the wellbeing of new superintendent leaders. New superintendents face immense challenges as they begin to learn the role and responsibilities of leading a school district and serving a community during times of uncertainty, technological advancements, and accountability pressures. The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) commits to meeting the needs of new executive leaders by providing experienced and trained superintendent mentors, matching mentors-mentees with similar demographic and geographic experience. As mentors visit their superintendent mentees on-site, they practice the essential mentoring skills of active listening, asking powerful questions, summarizing and paraphrasing key ideas, and inquiry-approached dialogue. As superintendents lead teaching and learning, guide operations and management, develop policies, advocate for local needs, and establish agreed upon goals around a common vision, a mentor provides a vital sounding board and collaborative partner. Successful mentoring must be built on a trusting and confidential relationship as exemplified in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018). KELI mentors bridge their experience in the field with the new superintendent’s experiences in navigating conversation during on-site sessions. Being “in the district” provides a mentor with a wealth of information to understand the context in meeting the individual needs of the mentee.

KELI focuses on building capacity in each new district leader through intentional coaching strategies outlined in Cheliotis and Reilly (2018), *Coaching Conversations: Transforming your school one conversation at a time*. These coaching strategies probe the new superintendent to better understand and clarify who they are as a leader and how their decisions impact their local school district community. Mentors strive to inquire, assume positive intent, anchor to established professional goals and the strategic plan of the district, and provide opportunities for reflective feedback. Mentors also observe new superintendents in practice, often at a local board meeting or all staff meeting. This contextual application of mentoring

allows confidential feedback based on years of wisdom. In addition, new superintendents in the KELI program are provided with opportunities to network with other new superintendents across the state. Networking occurs in cohort meetings, allowing new superintendents to have professional learning while engaging in meaningful relationship-building with other new superintendents. Practicing state superintendents, KELI mentors, and other leadership experts provide relevant and timely topics during these sessions for new leaders to share ideas, think critically, and collaboratively problem-solve on current issues. At the end of the initial year of practice, mentees provide formal self-reflection on their first-year experience, highlighting their areas of growth and next steps in leadership. The superintendency can be lonely; therefore, mentoring is a critical resource that supports the wellbeing of each new superintendent. KELI’s focus on individualized, contextual mentoring along with the power of networking, aligns closely to the inquiry-based approach that focuses on skill development and the power of networks in educational leadership. One superintendent mentee noted, “As frustrating as it was, my mentor never just gave me the answer. They always knew the right questions to ask that guided me to the answers I needed.”

Mentoring and Faculty Wellbeing

Faculty wellbeing in higher education is increasingly recognized as essential for personal fulfillment and institutional success. Mentoring programs have emerged as a key strategy to support faculty, particularly early-career members, in navigating the complexities of academic life and contributes to overall wellbeing. Peer mentoring is effective when individuals in similar roles come together to share strengths, learn collaboratively, and support one another’s growth (Griggs, 2024). In higher education, peer mentoring is a relationship-centered process that fosters resilience, professional fulfillment, and sustained engagement. At its best, it naturally incorporates active listening, powerful questioning, the use of data, and reflective feedback. When these elements are intentionally integrated and aligned with the PERMA model (Seligman 2011, 2018), peer mentoring becomes a structured, evidence-informed, and wellbeing-focused practice.

Active listening is foundational to effective peer mentoring. It goes beyond simply hearing and requires full presence, empathy, and attention to verbal and nonverbal cues. This kind of listening creates a safe, trusting space where participants feel genuinely seen and heard. Feeling valued in this way cultivates positive emotions important to the PERMA model. Building on this, powerful questioning invites deeper thinking and discovery. Open-ended, thought-provoking questions help faculty clarify goals, surface assumptions, and generate new perspectives. Rather than providing answers, these questions support individual learning. This approach fosters engagement,

another pillar of PERMA, by enabling faculty to connect more meaningfully with one another, their work, and experience greater purpose and satisfaction.

The use of data in peer mentoring supports evidence-based reflection and planning. Whether drawn from student evaluations, research metrics, or self-assessments, data offers a concrete foundation for discussion. It shifts the focus from abstract to observable trends and measurable outcomes. Within peer mentoring, data is not used for evaluation but as a resource for insight and growth, supporting a sense of accomplishment, also central to the PERMA framework.

Reflective feedback further enriches the mentoring process. When offered thoughtfully and respectfully, feedback validates areas of strength while encouraging growth in other areas. It promotes greater self-awareness and a continuous learning mindset.

The university workplace presents a unique set of challenges, including heavy workloads, academic pressures, extensive service commitments, complex interpersonal dynamics, and limited advancement opportunities (Roos & Borkoski, 2021). Addressing these challenges and promoting wellbeing are essential for maintaining mental health, job satisfaction, and productivity of faculty. Mentoring, in this context, is not merely beneficial, it is essential to foster both personal wellbeing and institutional success.

Conclusion

Evidence shows that mentoring is an effective, research-informed strategy for promoting wellbeing and professional development in education. What works is a mentoring approach that intentionally incorporates active listening, powerful questioning, data-informed reflection, and respectful, constructive feedback aligned with the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011, 2018). These practices are particularly effective for early- and mid-career teachers, principals, superintendents, and higher education faculty, who are navigating critical transitions. When mentoring is implemented in inclusive, collaborative settings, mentoring not only supports individual resilience and fulfillment but also fosters a culture of mutual support, accountability, and success across the academic life span.

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