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Taking Wellbeing to Heart: Peer Co-mentoring for Adapting to Constant Change

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Educators are struggling under the weight of constant change brought on by challenges in our post-pandemic world. These challenges are psychosocial, economic, and political. Dr. Linda Searby and others have named this process of reacting to constant cycles of change as "initiative fatigue." This paper will describe findings from a research study of a peer co-mentoring process for aspiring school leaders that uses co-mentoring to address one's reactions to constant change. Relational mentoring models focused on exploring each aspiring leader's context along with the implementation of effective co-mentoring practices form the basis of the peer co-mentoring process. To create a respectful and confidential community using peer co-mentoring, group norms were established, communication styles focused on inquiry and using a "critical friends" approach to feedback were explored, and reflective practice was employed. Co-mentoring practices were integrated with the PERMA model of wellbeing. Seven graduate students who were Principal or Program Administrator Certification Interns participated in the peer co-mentoring process. Data included field notes, written assignments, and interviews. The research question focused on understanding how the peer co-mentoring process contributed to the development of a respectful and confidential community in which participants could explore their own reactions to change and initiative fatigue and focus on approaches to managing change based on the dynamics of wellbeing. Participants concluded that the peer co-mentoring processes and the resulting respectful and confidential community helped them develop and practice coping strategies based on adaptive leadership practices. In adaptive leadership one must pause and discern whether a challenge is technical or adaptive. Participants co-mentored each other providing details for technical challenges by providing resources and support. For adaptive challenges, which have no straightforward answer, the PERMA model of wellbeing provided a framework to counter the effects of constant change.

Keywords: Initiative fatigue, co-mentoring, critical friends, PERMA model

Introduction - Literature Review

In examining the term "wellbeing" (or well-being) there has been much written about the term in disciplines such as health sciences, family and consumer sciences, and psychology (such as humanistic or positive psychology). For example, Kihm and McGregor (2020) conducted a 10-year review of the literature defining wellness and wellbeing and concluded that in the family and consumer sciences literature during that period the two terms were conflated. Kihm and McGregor (2020) did suggest further work needed to be done to investigate the usage of the terms as the term "wellness" is a process and the term "wellbeing" is a state of being (p. 11). Kihm and McGregor (2020), citing the work of King (2007), state that "wellbeing is a contented state of being happy, healthy, and prosperous" (p. 11). Cabrera and Donaldson (2024) note that in 2000, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi collaborated in theorizing a way "to understand people's strengths and what contributes to human flourishing" (p. 510) in response to a psychological approach that was often focused on pathology. Cabrera and Donaldson (2024) explain that the concept of PERMA identifies the main components of wellbeing as "positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (p. 510). Cabrera and Donaldson (2014), citing Seligman (2011), note a full definition of the acronym PERMA:

> Positive emotions refer to emotions like happiness, joy, and gratitude. Engagement refers to fully utilizing one's skills, strengths, and attentions for a challenging task. Positive relationships refer to feeling valued and supported by others. Meaning refers to having a sense of purpose and direction in life, which helps contribute to a feeling that life is valuable and worth living, and accomplishment refers to having feelings of mastery and achievement. (p. 510) [Italics

used to highlight the acronym PERMA.]

Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019) suggest that with "the ever-changing and conflicting professional demands, work-related stress, anxiety, burnout and increasing work-life imbalance" (p. 229) educators need to attend to their wellbeing more than ever. Wang (2025) echoes concerns about the increasing workload demands on school leaders and their effects on what he refers to as "cognitive wellbeing," stating, "the increasing work intensity and complexities complicate [the] principal's role and thrust them under significant pressure to meet the numerous cognitive demands" (p. 1).

For purposes of this article, the term mentoring has it foundational roots in work examining developmental relationships in the workplace (Allen & Eby, 2010; Kochan, 2002; Kram, 1988; Mullen, 2005; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). The work of Fletcher and Ragins (2007), specifically in relational cultural theory (RCT) and the three tenets of RCT: "interdependent self-in-relation," "growth-fostering interactions," and "systemic power" (pp. 378-389), form touchstones for how I examine mentoring relationships. Other authors such as Kochan and Pascarelli (2003) and Kochan and Freeman (2020) inform how I think about mentoring relationships across contexts, communities, and cultures. Domínguez and Kochan (2020) have provided a way to think about mentoring relationships from perspectives that include reciprocal, two-way communication in mentoring relationships, also pointing out that mentoring relationships no longer have to be in a dyad but can be in the form of groups and that technology is now often used as a part of the mentoring process. My understanding of the term co-mentoring has connections to "collaboration, shared decision making, and systems thinking" (p. 20) from the work of Kochan and Trimble (2000). Kochan and Trimble (2000), citing earlier works, also note that co-mentoring requires "recognizing interdependences and building a sense of community" (p. 20).

Another component of this literature review comes from the scholarship on leadership. I suggest an adaptive leadership model from the work of Heifetz et al. (2009) as a lens for examining the work of educational leaders such as PK-12 building-based and school district leaders. Our current PK-12 educational leaders are working in unprecedented times with the lingering effects of the pandemic and the current political assaults on our public education system from funding cuts, school violence, and the lessening of civil norms of communication among key stakeholders such as school and school district staff, students, families of the students, school board members, and other community stakeholders. Adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) notes that leaders need to pause and consider if an issue or problem is "technical" (a problem that can be resolved with step-by-step leadership actions), or if the problem is an "adaptive" problem, meaning a problem without easy solutions such as poverty or political unrest.

A final part of this literature review is focused on understanding the impact of change processes on leadership. The work of Fullan (2007, 2015, 2025) informs my views on understanding change processes, particularly educational change. Fullan's (2007) work suggests that to lead through change one needs "to develop a mind-set and action set that are constantly cultivated and refined. There are no shortcuts" (p. 171). Fullan (2007) notes six components in understanding the change process: "The goal is not to innovate the most. It is not enough to have the best ideas. Appreciate the implementation dip. Redefine resistance. Reculturing is the name of the game. Never a checklist, always complexity" (p. 171). Utilizing these six components can be a starting place to evaluate one's approach to understanding a change process. In his latest book, Fullan (2025) offers a stark critique of educators' past failures to understand change process and suggests collaboration among all stakeholders as a way forward. In the next section, I will describe how this literature is grounded in the peer co-mentoring process I have developed.

Introduction-Method

My journey into the addition of a new component to the peer co-mentoring process I have created, which I call a "co-mentoring circle," came by way of my connections to several key mentors in my academic career. Late last year, I saw a book chapter call by editor Dr. Tyrone Bynoe. In looking at Dr. Bynoe's (2024) work I discovered his book chapter entitled "A Conceptual Model of School Principal Mentoring: Nurturing Wellness (and Wellbeing) Within a Continuum of School Leadership Preparation." Reading Dr. Bynoe's (2024) work led me to the edited book by Kutsyuruba and Kochan (2024) entitled Mentoring for Wellbeing in Schools. Dr. Fran Kochan has been a longtime mentor to me in my academic career. The forward to that edited book was by another mentor, Dr. Linda Searby. The forward by Searby (2024) spoke to me deeply because I had been reflecting on my latest collection of assessment data on the co-mentoring circle process I had developed. In that assessment data the topic that kept rising to the top of the co-mentoring circle discussions was focused on how to do the work as a PK-12 principal or school district leader and still have any type of life-work balance. In essence, at the root of many discussions we had had in the co-mentoring circle this past academic year, the discussion became about this very topic of wellbeing. Searby's (2024) suggestion about the process of reacting to constant cycles of change as "initiative fatigue" was underscored by work I was doing with our aspiring PK-12 principal and program administrator interns (Interns) in their internships and in class as we worked to understand the change process (see Fullan, 2007, 2015, 2025) and adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Using Co-mentoring Circles as Part of the Program Coursework

I developed the co-mentoring circles process as a part of the Principal and Program Administrator Certification Program coursework. In Washington state there are two types of certification: the Principal Certification Program is for candidates who hold a teaching certificate and will go on to be building-based leaders in PK-12 schools. The Program Administrator Certification Program is for school district-based leaders who will work in areas of educational leadership at the school district level that do not require a teaching certificate, such as communication, facilities, finance, or transportation.

The co-mentoring circle is used during our monthly seminar for our Interns. It takes time to form a working co-mentoring circle. Currently there are 10 components in the formation of the co-mentoring circle. We first establish group working norms or agreements (Gibbs, 2006), detailing how we will treat one another as we work together. We also hold a code of confidentiality based on the work of Palmer (2009). Then we study our own communication styles and skills taking a communication self-assessment (Alessandra, 2024) to learn more about our own strengths and about the styles of others. As we examine our communication skills and styles we also study how to give and receive feedback based on the work of Sullivan and Glanz (2013) and Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2016). We also practice using a "critical friends" approach from the work of Costa and Kallick (1993) in our discussions. A critical friend's approach requires that one use inquiry and not give advice unless requested. We also study the work of Zachary and Fischler (2014) to think more deeply about how to have a mentoring conversation using their "five levels of conversation model" (pp. 165-169). Zachary and Fain (2022) highlight the importance of examining how we approach our mentoring conversations and the importance of deep listening and the use of inquiry. Next, we discuss the topic of reflection and work to develop a reflective practice (Arrendondo-Rucinski, 2005; Rodgers, 2002). We reflect as a circle and individually throughout our time working together. As we work on all these components of the circle formation we also take time to study trust building actions based on the work of Combs et al. (2015) and Tschannen-Moran (2007, 2014). There are also three activities that I lead that help deepen trust called "hopes and concerns," the "professional timeline," and the "self-portrait." For more information on the details of the co-mentoring circle formation components see Cowin (2021, 2023, & 2024).

After the co-mentoring circle is formed, time in the circle is used in discussion of topics that the Interns want to discuss. They send me topics and as the facilitator I set a tentative agenda based on those topics. We set the final agenda collaboratively before we begin each circle. We also affirm our group agreements, code of confidentiality, and take time to consider our communication styles, skills, how we give and receive feedback, and seek to use a critical friends approach using inquiry as we work together in our circle discussions. We co-mentor each other as we participate in circle discussions using attentive listening and an inquiry approach to help each other think more deeply about the discussion topics and offer support and provide resources to each other.

Methodology

I record my ongoing observations, insights, interpretations, reflections, and future points to consider in my "Impressionistic Record" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 188) [field notes] from our co-mentoring circles. Seven Interns from a past Principal and Program Administrator Certification Program cohort were the focus of this study. There were six women and one man in the cohort. The Interns were all veteran educators with from 9 to 20-years experience (9, 10, 10, 14, 17, 18, & 20 years experience) in education. Six were Principal Candidates and one was a Program Administrator Candidate. One Candidate was bilingual in English and Spanish and the other six Candidates listed English as their first language. Six of the Candidates self-identified as white with one candidate self-identifying as Asian American. Data included the participants' written work from the circle formation activities and assignments. as well as my field notes. The data was analyzed inductively for emerging topics, using an open-coding and thematic delineation method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The circle activities are described retrospectively. Limitations in this approach can include hindsight bias (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990) and inaccuracies in recall (Cooper et al., 1978). Chase's (2003) suggestion to "listen for gaps, silences, or contradictions" (p. 289) was considered during the data analysis.

Results

The topics suggested by the Interns for discussion in our co-mentoring circle included (and this list does not represent every suggested topic): conflict resolution; violence (assaults/physical fights) and psychological violence (such as cyber bullying); political conflict related to topics such as immigration and citizenship status; political conflict related to school board issues on curricular issues or athletic participation by students who identify as transgender; evaluation of staff who are performing below the required standards of professionalism and union representation discussions about employment issues; and budgetary deficit concerns due to the current national and state political environment in education.

Co-mentoring circle discussions on conflict resolution revolved around many different stakeholders such as conflicts between students; between staff members; between students and staff members; between students, their

families, and staff members; between students from different schools at an inter-school district sporting event; and between staff and community members with school board members at a school board meeting.

All Interns expressed that dealing with conflict took a great deal of time. Several Interns noted that providing each speaker time to tell their side of the story, documenting what was said, then communicating this information to all the school and school district staff took hours away from other important leadership activities. One Intern noted, "I could fill a whole notebook with my notes that I took as I debriefed with all the parties and then I had to type it up on the required form. I didn't get anything else done that day" (Unnamed Intern, 2025). When asked how many hours were taken up with the multiple meetings with all stakeholders, documentation of all the meetings, and communicating all the documentation needed to all stakeholders, the answer Interns often gave was "hundreds of hours per incident" (Unnamed Interns, 2025). When an incident involved violence such as physical assaults (fights), the time for meeting, documenting, and communicating up and down the chain of command was increased significantly. Here is an example quote, "The fight after the game last Friday took me all weekend to document so I was exhausted to start the next week off" (Unnamed Intern, 2024). The Intern went on to comment that after the "fight was in the paper" more stakeholders came forward wanting to relay information they had and so the meetings, documenting, and communicating with school and district leadership continued for weeks (Unnamed Intern, 2024).

An example of conflict resolution between a student, student's family, and a staff member that took hours to meet about, document, and communicate with all stakeholders about was described by an Intern like this [the names are pseudonyms]:

> I was walking down the hall for my prep, and a kindergarten student (let's call him Tom) was melting down. The teacher looked frazzled… I offered to take the student for a walk/break. He initially didn't want to come with me… but I got him talking about his favorite things… then go read a book in the library…. He's a kindergarten student reading at a 3rd grade level…. The day after, I came to work with another student in the same class, and Tom started exhibiting attention seeking behavior and wanted me to read with him again. When I didn't he started melting down. He did this again when he saw me at lunch. Later that day the mom called and yelled at the principal that Tom told her his kindergarten teacher (not me) had dragged him into the building from recess, so the district investigator was called in…. Video feed showed this didn't happen and the teacher was cleared…. A meeting was put together between all parties to discuss next steps. I chose [to write about] this experience because I believe it's a solid example of some of the behaviors we're seeing in schools. (Unnamed Intern, 2025)

Several Interns were concerned about student safety during recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement activities in our community. PK-12 students whose family members may have unknown immigration status became a concern for several Interns who wanted support finding resources to provide education for themselves and the students and their families that they serve.

One Intern told this story about how important listening and building trust is with students and their family members:

> Parents showed up at the school, afraid to send their child to school that day because of the political climate and fear of immigration agents taking their child while at school. As I was the only administrator present that morning, I sat down with the parents and a translator to assure the parents they could trust us to keep their child safe by first sharing how much we care about their child and their right to an education and second explained our safety protocols. The parents left reassured and the student attended school that day. (Unnamed Intern, 2025)

Budgetary concerns were weighing heavily on one Intern when this story was shared about how state and national political changes were affecting the program, school, and school district:

> First, staff are seeking clear, consistent messaging about potential changes and what they mean for their roles and responsibilities. Second, there is a strong desire to advocate for the continuation of critical early learning programs, as the potential reductions would disproportionately impact the most vulnerable children in our community. Finally, many staff members are struggling with the mental and emotional burden of uncertainty, making it essential to provide spaces for dialogue and support. In response, I have prioritized open and proactive communication. Additionally, I have emphasized the importance of focusing on the work at hand - ensuring that despite the uncertainty, students continue to receive high-quality early learning experiences. Recognizing that stress levels are high, I have also encouraged staff to utilize self-care strategies and collaborative problem-solving to maintain focus and morale. (Unnamed Intern, 2025)

The examples noted above highlight only a few of the topics from this cohort's co-mentoring circle discussions as this article's length does not allow for all the topics to be described. The topics highlighted in these examples were: conflict resolution; violence (assaults/physical fights); political conflict related to topics such as immigration and citizenship status; and budgetary deficit concerns due to the current national and state political environment in education. As I reflected on all the topics from this cohort's co-mentoring circle discussions, I could see the complexities of the work our Interns were engaged

in and why so often they talked about how much stress they were under and how they were always feeling exhausted. The reflections, feedback, and assessments provided by the Interns gave me pause to think and reflect on how I could support the Interns with these concerns of stress and feelings of exhaustion. It was a happy coincidence that during this reflection I was exposed to the work on wellbeing.

Conclusion

Integrating Wellbeing Into the Co-mentoring Circle

As illuminated by the Interns in the examples above and as noted by Bynoe (2024), "public school principals assume positions with unprecedented responsibilities" (p. 267). I would add that aspiring school and school district leaders are also stepping into similar situations that they may feel underprepared for and without experience to handle. In Bynoe's (2024) revised model the following components could be steps to consider to foster wellness and wellbeing: "addressing school principal loneliness, healthy habits, effective time management, endurance in challenging and toxic school settings, and surviving systemic crises" (p. 274). As I consider new additions for the co-mentoring circle formation processes, I am considering drawing upon these suggestions from Bynoe (2024) and from Seligman's (2011, 2018) PERMA model. Cabrera and Donaldson (2024) describe "the concept of PERMA, consisting of building blocks of wellbeing including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (p. 510). Searby (2024) [citing Norrish, 2015] notes the PERMA model offers the following six components and included a more detailed description of each component.

- Positive Emotions: sufficient experience of positive emotions, such as gratitude, is positively correlated with wellbeing.
- Engagement: deep immersion in activities that create flow where one is highly competent and feels deeply fulfilled at the same moment.
- Relationships: the affirmation people experience in relationships allows them to see themselves and others as worthy of kindness and justice.
- Meaning: human beings seek meaning and purpose and feel fulfilled when they fit into a larger whole.
- Achievement: executing plans and achieving goals in the face of obstacles is intrinsically rewarding.
- Vitality/Health: nutrition, fitness, physical care and stress management are associated with both physical and mental health. (pp. viii-ix)

I believe I can incorporate readings and activities to help our Interns think more about their wellbeing, starting with the work of the authors cited above. I have already started planning an introductory activity to have the Interns become more aware of their own wellbeing before starting their internship. I am also planning for follow-up activities to check in on their wellbeing throughout the program. I believe a temperature check approach at the beginning of each co-mentoring circle can also help bring awareness of the importance of wellbeing to each circle session. I am also planning for a wellbeing check to be a part of our reflection at the end of each circle session. I have much to work on this summer before the start of the next cohort in the fall semester. I need to do more reading, reflection, and planning to learn more about wellbeing myself and to be sure I am modeling effective wellbeing practices for my students. I am excited about how this work on wellbeing might help support and sustain our future leaders. They can also bring this important work on wellbeing to their schools and school districts in what I hope could initiate a co-mentoring process with all stakeholders with whom they work. Our future leaders and their mentors deserve the best we can provide in terms of new research-based approaches to leadership preparation. I am excited to get to work and look forward to hearing from others who are doing this work to learn from you and to co-mentor each other in this important work.

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