

The Power of Networks in One-on-One Mentoring and Workforce Development in Early Childhood

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The Central New Mexico Community College Early Childhood Mentor Network (ECMN) addresses the need for a stronger early childhood workforce through an innovative approach to mentorship training for experienced early childhood teachers supporting practicum students in their classrooms. The power of peer networking and relationship development is used to support reciprocal learning among all participants in the network including higher education faculty and early childhood program directors. The ECMN participants represent diverse school programs and teaching philosophies. Through the peer network, participants jointly develop shared strategies and practices that are used in their one-on-one mentoring relationships with early childhood practicum students. The strategies developed by the network participants make a collective impact on the individual mentoring relationships. Mentors support and challenge each other while moving towards individual competencies in their roles as mentors. Using innovative self and collaborative reflective practice strategies during face to face meetings and an online course, mentors analyze and develop strategies based on teacher candidate experiences and classroom scenarios. In this sense, the practicum students and children in the classrooms contribute to the mentor teachers' learning and the practicum students benefit from the collective dialogue and shared strategies developed by the mentor group. This paper will highlight the evaluation findings of the ECMN. The findings suggest that mentorship networks and the developmental relationships that emerge from the networks have potential impact on retaining experienced professionals in the field while simultaneously building a better educated early childhood workforce.

Introduction

Research shows that the role of early childhood education is crucial in child development. Quality early childhood education (ECE) can ensure all children are ready for school, reducing the likelihood of achievement gaps between students of color and their White peers, and between low-income students and middle-and high-income students (Duncan, Dowsett, & Claessens, 2007). The importance of early childhood is not matched by resources and support for the early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators are woefully underpaid and cite stress, feeling isolated, and lack of professional acknowledgement as major reasons that they leave the field (Totenhagen et al., 2016). In response to the challenges of teacher preparation, significantly high turnover rates, and low salaries of the early childhood workforce in New Mexico, Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) created the Early Childhood Mentor Network (herein, referred to as ECMN). The ECMN is a structured mentor education and training program that supports experienced early childhood educators with online and in-person training, matches them with early childhood education students for quality practicum placements, and provides professional learning activities for directors and teachers to improve the quality and culture of early childhood education in New Mexico. The Thornburg Foundation, an investor in early childhood education in New Mexico, provided CNM with the ECMN's initial three years of funding.

Recognizing the Importance of Quality Teacher Preparation

The demographics of CNM students enrolled in the Early Childhood associate degree program reflect the current trends in early childhood workforce in New Mexico. According to CNM student data, the average age is 34-years-old and the majority of the students are women of color. Many are currently employed as an early childhood educator and are responsible for their own classrooms. Access to higher education is possible through a statewide scholarship program, T.E.A.C.H (Teacher Education And Compensation Helps), managed by the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children (NMAEYC) for early childhood educators currently working in the field. However, wages remain low and the early childhood turnover rate in New Mexico is 30.7% annually, on par with the nationally calculated averages, (Heinz, Breindenbach, & Bell, 2015). Many early childhood programs are understaffed, making it challenging for students to leave their own classrooms to complete required practicums in the field (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011).

Like most higher education early childhood programs, CNM is faced with many challenges in securing practicum placements that reflect and apply the early childhood developmentally appropriate theories taught in their coursework. Early childhood students are typically placed in their own classroom or with cooperating teachers who do not receive guidance from the CNM program with little knowledge of how to support practicum students in their classrooms. For many students, the practicum experience means checking a box to fulfill program requirements, rather than a meaningful practicum experience that contributes to their understanding of early childhood best practices.

Research in early childhood teacher education suggests that placing practicum students with a high-quality mentor teacher

in a classroom that reflects best practices has the potential to retain new teachers in the field (Kagan, Kauerz & Tarrant, 2008), and increases teachers' effectiveness when interacting with children throughout their teaching career (Howes, James, & Ritchie, 2003). CNM sees a way to address the need for meaningful practicum experiences by building a network of early childhood teachers trained to mentor and support practicum students in their classrooms. The hypothesis is that practicum students would benefit from being placed with trained mentor teachers and that experienced teachers would benefit from mentor training.

Description of ECMN Evaluation

This paper highlights the two-year evaluation findings of the ECMN. Researchers collected and analyzed surveys and focus group interviews with mentor teachers, program directors, practicum students and faculty. The findings suggest that mentorship networks and the relationships that emerge from the networks have potential impact on retaining experienced professionals in the field while simultaneously building a better-educated early childhood workforce.

Overview of CNM Early Childhood Mentor Network

The ECMN was originally conceived to address issues related to required practicum placements. As the largest program in New Mexico and one of the top ten in the country in terms of graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), CNM places approximately 200 students a year in field placements. The high demand for practicum placements is the catalyst for CNM to seek partnerships with early childhood community programs. CNM leverages early childhood programs in the community to create a network that works together to build the early childhood workforce capacity in New Mexico.

The ECMN builds upon the four strands of professional practices set forth by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council's report, Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8 (2015) as necessary for workforce development in early childhood: 1) preparation programs; 2) training; 3) mentoring and coaching; 4) and in-service professional development. These four areas are seen as crucial for developing and sustaining the knowledge and competencies of early childhood educators. The visual of the ECMN is that of a bicycle wheel. CNM is at the center of the wheel or the hub, the organizer of the four areas of professional practices. The individual programs and teachers within the programs are represented by the spokes coming out from the hub and participate and practice the necessary competencies. All of the ECMN participating programs are interconnected and move together to make the wheel move forward. The wheel represents a network of relationships and partnerships with early childhood programs that move together in improving early care and education in New Mexico. The following section describes the spokes of the wheel, the mentor teachers, directors, and the professional development practices that work to move the wheel forward.

Early Childhood Mentor Network Mentor Teachers

The ECMN started in 2016 with a cohort of 30 mentor teachers. Another cohort of 32 teachers was added in 2017. To ensure quality practicum placements, CNM developed a recruitment process to attract experienced and highly-qualified teachers in the field. A mentor teacher in the ECMN network must have a minimum of an associates degree in early childhood education, three years of classroom experience, and the support of the program director. This ensures that the teachers have completed higher level coursework than their mentee and are in a position to take the next step professionally into mentorship. In the past two years, CNM has worked with mentors at 30 different early childhood programs in the Albuquerque area and by the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, 52 mentors completed the program. An important aspect of the ECMN is the opportunity to receive a Mentorship Certificate that was created in partnership the New Mexico Child Youth and Family Department's (CYFD) Office of Child Development. The Mentorship Certificate from CYFD is an incentive for mentor teachers, an honor to be recognized for their expertise and professionalism at the state level.

Participants in the ECMN represent varied philosophical approaches in early childhood from Montessori to Reggio Emilia-inspired programs. The diversity of philosophical approaches in the participants is one of the program's greatest strengths. The mentors have the potential to learn from each other and the practices that make them different can elevate the field for everyone. Teachers are given the option to host a monthly meeting within their classrooms, where they are able to provide a more in-depth overview of their teaching philosophy and how it relates to the overall classroom environment design. Diverse environments for field experiences are opportunities for practicum students to experience a wider perspective of the field of early childhood education (Recchia, Beck, Esposito, & Tarrant, 2009).

Early Childhood Mentor Network Professional Development

CNM also recognizes that quality field experiences are not solely about an exceptional mentor teacher and individual classrooms, but that the early childhood program as a whole needs to reflect best practices (LaBoskey & Richert, 2002). Practicum students have the potential to learn about the principles taught in CNM classes the second they walk through the doors of an early childhood program. Therefore, CNM created professional development opportunities through a program

director's network to complement the work of the mentor teachers and build program support at the leadership level. Through peer networking and the relationships that develop, program directors are able to learn from each other how to support teacher leaders and practicum students at their site. Over the course of two years, 46 different administrators from 34 centers have attended ECMN Director Network Meetings.

Early childhood professional development tends to come from outside organizations such as state trainings aligned to new regulations. Many early childhood educators express a feeling of existing in isolation, or silos. There are few opportunities in New Mexico for early childhood teachers or directors to interact with each other to share struggles, challenges, and successes in their programs. A network approach to professional development starts with the needs and interests of the mentors and directors. ECMN staff and CNM faculty design monthly workshops to fit the ECMN participants' needs and interests to create shared practices. The workshop participants include mentor teachers, program directors and their staff are invited to attend.

A Network Built on Relationships

One of the strongest outcomes of the ECMN are the relationships that develop by bringing together teachers, directors, and faculty through ongoing opportunities to share and interact. The ECMN is multi-layered and structured to support relationship development at all levels within the network from the practicum student, mentor teacher, early childhood programs and directors, higher education faculty, and the children in early childhood classrooms. All participants have the potential to develop relationships, learn from each other, and engage in joint activities through a balance of power, and co-learning (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The following sections describe the relationships in the ECMN.

Mentor Teacher Relationships

Mentor teachers develop relationships with each other, with practicum students, and with CNM faculty through three methods including an online course, mentor teacher meetings, and through practicum student placement in their classrooms.

Online Course. There are two required college level courses for mentor teachers. Both are designed to build a community of learners in an online format. Early Childhood Mentorship I examines the role of a mentor in education, skills and tools for mentorship, and adult learning strategies. Early Childhood Mentorship II builds on the skills developed in the prior course and focuses on self and collaborative reflection strategies necessary for articulating teaching practices and developing a productive and meaningful relationship with practicum students.

Monthly Meetings. In addition to the coursework, mentors are required to attend monthly meetings. Mentor meetings build on the coursework and bring the theoretical understanding of mentorship and working with adult learners into practice. The meetings are structured to flatten hierarchy and to allow the expertise of all participants to be honored. They often take place within mentors' programs and classrooms, allowing participants to learn from each other's classroom environments, philosophies, and teaching practices.

Within the meetings, mentors worked together to develop mentoring strategies through a job embedded, reflective practice model (Hunzicker, 2012; Sparks, 1994). Reflective conversations between mentors and their peers about beliefs and assumptions are strategies used to guide mentoring practices. Together the mentors deconstruct, analyze, and develop strategies based on scenarios from authentic experiences that occur with practicum students within their classroom. The jointly developed mentoring strategies during the meetings are then taken back to individual classrooms and mentorship roles. One mentor commented how the mentor meetings impacted her ability to self-reflect on her teaching practice with others:

The program has made me more self-reflective in my teaching practice. I am a more intentional teacher and bring that reflection to my peers. We are talking in a way about our work that we never did before. (Mentor Interviews, April 2018)

The collective dialogue and shared strategies developed among the mentor teachers impacts their individual relationships with practicum students. Monthly meetings are very well received. According to the year two evaluation of the ECMN, there was an 88% total attendance rate over the length of the program since 2016.

Relationships with Higher Education Faculty

After the first year of the ECMN program, mentors stressed a need for developing stronger relationships with CNM early childhood faculty. As a result, CNM early childhood faculty began to attend the mentor meetings. Attending the meetings is an opportunity for CNM faculty to learn about practicum placements and support the mentors as they work with practicum students. Faculty benefit from the collective knowledge of the mentors and bring back the mentors' lived classroom

experiences to the academic classroom. In addition, the meetings provide a space for faculty and mentor teachers to interact and improve their processes for communication. Together, faculty and mentor teachers are now able to respond quickly to situations that arise with practicum students in the field. There is a higher level of trust between community early childhood programs and the CNM faculty.

Relationship with Practicum Students

The ECMN supports the complex roles and relationships that exist between mentor teacher and practicum student (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). As previously described, mentor teachers jointly develop mentoring strategies through the online course and meetings. Shared strategies include how and when to provide feedback and guidance to practicum students through scheduled face-to-face meetings, emails, text messages and phone conferences. This type of collaborative sharing is in contrary to what a typical mentoring relationship might look like where the mentor and mentee work in isolation. The ECMN mentors apply the collective knowledge of the network while working with their mentee. They are able to use the positive experiences, challenges, and struggles of their fellow mentors in their own practice. A practicum student recognized the value of the mentor relationship in the following statement:

The mentor was extremely helpful. We debriefed at the end of each day, which helped me understand what I was doing and where I could improve. At times I did not know how to manage student discipline, but having a seasoned mentor was very helpful. (Practicum Student Interview, April 2018)

The mentor and mentee relationship provides reciprocal learning opportunities. One mentor stated, “I feel mentoring CNM practicum students in my classroom has helped me to become a better educator” (Notes from Mentor Interviews, April 2018). Hosting a practicum student is a unique form of professional development for mentor teachers. For mentors, one of the highest forms of professional development is to be able to explain their practice and philosophical approach to teaching, while simultaneously guiding the mentee to develop their own practices and belief system.

Sustaining the Field through Relationships

The year two evaluation revealed that there is considerable value placed on the professional community created through the ECMN. Mentors reported that they felt the network provided not just a learning opportunity, but also an opportunity to build relationships with other educators, faculty, and practicum students. Meaningful relationships and a stronger sense of belonging are major contributors to their personal and professional growth.

One mentor reported:

I now find time to talk to others and build connections. I never thought about the need or value to network but I realize that we are part of a community like any other. We need to build these relationships to make the industry stronger. (Notes from Mentor Interviews, April 2018)

Mentors, faculty, and directors spoke about the ECMN as providing support that is often lacking in the field of early childhood education. The ECMN is a way for current educators to learn from one another and support one another, thus sustaining the field through relationships. Many of the participants spoke about the silos that existed within early childhood education and how there are not mechanisms to support shared practices, discuss practices, and to learn from peers. Results from the evaluation have shown that the ECMN provides a space for shared learning and collaboration among diverse programs within New Mexico with the goal of building a stronger early childhood workforce together.

Next Steps for the Early Childhood Mentor Network

As the ECMN enters its third year, many questions and wonderings regarding the continued direction of the program remain. One of the major questions is, “How does CNM continue to build on the momentum of the ECMN?” To achieve a broader reach in the community of Albuquerque and the state of New Mexico, there needs to be more resources spent on the ECMN. Teachers and directors spoke about their interest in more programming, more training, and more opportunities for collaboration. Greater resources could help in providing more resources to increase the quality of practicum students’ field placements.

In addition, recognizing that to sustain a professional community takes time. The ECMN needs the state and local stakeholders to invest in early childhood teachers as a long-term commitment, not just a temporary fix for early childhood workforce development. Rather, the ECMN and the development of mentoring relationships through networks should be recognized as a lasting way to develop professional learning and mentoring communities that can improve the quality of education for both higher education students and the young children and families served in New Mexico.

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