The development and testing of a time-limited mentoring model for experienced school leaders

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In Australia, mentoring has been incorporated into the induction process for principals, aspirant leaders and beginning teachers. However, internationally three significant impediments to mentoring success have been identified in the literature: insufficient time; mentors’ lack of professional expertise; and personality mismatches. To address these issues, a skills training program was developed in Victoria that utilized the principles of adult attachment theory and time-limited therapy. The model, consisting of six developmentally focused mentoring meetings, was introduced to principals across grade levels. A mixed methods analysis, carried out post-training, found significant improvement in the skills set and confidence levels of mentors (i.e. experienced school principals). An unexpected benefit was an improvement in the health and wellbeing of some mentors and protégés (i.e. aspiring assistant principals and a few teacher-leaders). In addition to the results that emerged from qualitative analysis, directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: mentor’s skills education; attachment theory; time-limited structures; principals; leadership

The successful mentoring of new school leaders by their experienced colleagues involves two busy professionals seeking time to conduct enough mentoring conferences to facilitate protégé growth. This alone can be a significant impediment to success of the relationship. If there is a perception from either party that time is not well spent when they do meet, the relationship is unlikely to survive. Yet time can be wasted and significant issues overlooked or avoided without a robust structure to frame the mentoring relationship. The ability of the mentor to quickly build a strong working relationship with the protégé is also essential (Awaya et al., 2003). With these obstacles in mind, two theories of interpersonal relationships were adapted to design a program in Victoria, Australia, for teaching experienced school leaders the craft of mentorship. In this article, the initial delivery of the program is reported and evaluated.

The program, ‘Mentoring matters: training mentors for Victorian government school leaders’ was developed by the Faculty of Education at Monash University. It was funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD]. The program co-ordinators employed the principles of attachment theory to teach mentors (i.e. experienced school principals) about the
craft of relationship formation and maintenance. Attachment theory also formed the structural outline for the mentoring sessions they would conduct. For the program to be consistent with the principles of attachment theory, the working definition of mentoring adopted was protection of the protégé through the building of a trusting working alliance. This is not a new idea in mentoring. The idea of mentor as protector is drawn from the French root of the word *protogere* – to protect (Roberts, 2000, p. 148). The support provided by the mentor as the *secure base* (Bowlby, 1978, 1988) for the protégé allows the examination of the individual’s own ‘problem frame’ from within (Stammers, 1992, p. 77). Framing obstacles to growth internally allows the protégé to identify and come to terms with the skills and attributes needed for successful leadership. Attachment theory, the most comprehensive theory of relationship formation and maintenance, is also the vehicle used to increase the mentor’s skills in articulating and managing the mentor-protégé relationship process.

The second theory drawn from the literature and adopted in the design of the project involves outlining time-limitation used in some forms of psychotherapy. In the mentoring context, time-limitation serves two purposes. Firstly, it contains the relationship within a time-manageable framework. This is beneficial for gaining commitment to the process by leaders who might otherwise be wary or reluctant to participate. In addition, by beginning with the end in mind, time-limitation creates a forward momentum for the dyad. As long as a trusting relationship can be developed, understanding at the outset that the relationship is finite helps focus the mentoring process on the substantive issues.

Before outlining the development and evaluation of the program, a brief overview of the Victorian educational context is needed. The model reported here was designed for an education system that is increasingly emphasizing the importance of the human dimension of school leadership (Department of Education, 2007). The system also needs rapidly to bring on new leaders to replace a large pool of near-to-retirement principals.

### Background issues

Like a woven fabric of human to human contact, schools are on the front line of relationships. (Program participant, 2008)

Mentoring has long been used as a vehicle for training aspirant leaders in many types of organizations. The benefits of successful mentoring have been widely reported (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennet, 2004). In Victoria, Australia, the DEECD (formerly the Department of Education) has incorporated mentoring into the induction process for new principals, aspirant leaders and beginning teachers, establishing it as an important component of a systematic approach to both teachers’ and school leaders’ development. However, within the education sector internationally, outcomes of mentoring programs vary widely. A meta-analysis of the mentoring literature by Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennet (2004) identified three significant impediments to success: insufficient time; the mentor’s lack of professional expertise; and, personality mismatches. The authors indicated that lack of professional expertise placed a considerable emotional burden on mentors and that this deficit magnified their reluctance to accept new protégés.
Considerable effort has been spent investigating the efficacy of different mentoring approaches and subsequent outcomes for protégés (Ehrich et al., 2004; Mertz, 2004). However, with one notable exception (Smith, 2007) little research has been conducted into two significant aspects of the mentoring process that the literature identifies as problematic:

(1) the efficacy of specific training for experienced school leaders to become expert mentors before they undertake a mentoring role; and
(2) the outcomes of the mentoring process for experienced school leaders when they have received training.

The current project was designed to address these questions in the Victorian educational environment, which is facing a unique school leadership challenge in the next five years.

The Victorian educational leadership context
The role of school leadership has changed significantly during recent times, with many more demands and skills required of school leaders. This has been recognized internationally and led to a study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2007 that sought to capture and compare the strengths and weaknesses of leadership development programs across 22 countries. Their reasons for this study were:

School leaders’ roles have changed from practising teachers with added responsibilities to full-time professional managers of human, financial and other resources accountable for their results. This has meant that more and more tasks have been added to the job description: instructional leadership, staff evaluation, budget management, performance assessment, accountability and community relations, to name some of the most prominent ones. In this environment, the range of knowledge and skills that effective school leaders need today is daunting: curricular, pedagogical, student and adult learning in addition to managerial and financial skills, abilities in group dynamics, interpersonal relations and communications. (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche, 2007)

No wonder then that the prospect of adding the role of mentor to new or aspirant leaders might make even the most experienced principals consider their skill set to be somewhat lacking. Yet mentoring is a vital component in the development of new school leaders, and directly affects the functioning and sustainability of the system. In the Victorian context, new leaders’ existing skill sets and experience levels prior to taking on significant leadership roles will not mirror those of their predecessors, because previous decisions by state governments mean that there will be many new leaders with only limited experience appointed to substantive leadership positions in the near future. Their leadership pathway will be different from the traditional pathway, and in Victoria it must be traversed rapidly in very large numbers.

Unique to the Victorian context is the impending retirement of approximately two thirds of current school principals over the next five years – approximately 1000 principals. Apart from the acute need to replace them with suitable candidates, this represents a significant challenge to the sustainability of the system as a whole through loss of knowledge, expertise and experience. Adding to the challenge is the lack of a ‘natural’ group of replacements due to a wholesale restructure of the
education system during the early- and mid-1990s. The restructure, led by the government of the day, removed many of the teachers who would have by now gained the necessary system and educational knowledge through 10 to 15 years’ experience, thereby becoming the ‘natural’ leadership successors. These teachers, as they were then, received exit packages that disallowed returning to the profession for five years post-exit. They were in effect forced to pursue other careers and have been lost to the profession. Leaving aside the question of whether this was a wise decision or not, the upshot of the policy has meant that Victoria’s future school leaders will have far less classroom, administrative and life experience when they take on leadership roles, including the principalship, and are therefore likely to require more help when they do. One significant way in which help can be provided is through effective mentoring by those who do have the experience.

The DEECD has been addressing the issue of leadership development and succession for a number of years and has been recognized as a leader in leadership development internationally by the OECD. Currently, 19 targeted leadership development programs – described as ‘a coherent system-wide approach to building an improvement culture and leadership capacity’ – are operating in the Victorian system (Matthews et al., 2007). Each of these programs is designed to fast-track younger and less experienced teachers into effective school leader positions at all levels of the system. Formal mentoring is an integral component in their ongoing development and support.

The current Victorian context represents a unique opportunity to research wholesale system-wide change in naturalistic settings. The rapidly growing evidence base for the impact of leadership on student learning outcomes, organizational health and general wellbeing (see, for example, Antonio & Salzfaß, 2007; Blackmore, 2004; Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Davies, 2007; Lewis, 2008). This means that if the system is to remain healthy, incoming leaders will need to rely heavily on the knowledge base and support that still resides in the system in the form of experienced principals. To this end, the DEECD funded the current project, which is designed to develop mentoring protocols, skills and techniques based on sound theoretical foundations; teach them to experienced/expert school leaders; and investigate the impact on leadership development and sustainability. A second aim was to build rich links between theory and practice and promote leader/practitioner research by developing leadership knowledge that is directly connected to practice. The project was designed to acknowledge the crucial influence of context on leadership and move the knowledge and practice of key contextual leadership skills from being tacit to explicit.

New mentors: from rich theory to expert practice

Mentoring can be defined as a relationship between two people and a process-oriented facilitation. Therefore, the process of mentoring lies at the heart of this project. The mentoring model was built from the fundamental principles of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1988) and solution-focused helping (Egan, 2002). Adult attachment theory, which built on Bowlby’s initial work, is the most comprehensive theory of the processes involved in reciprocal relationship formation and maintenance (Ainsworth, 1992; for a review of adult attachment theory see Bartholomew, 1994; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Rholes & Simpson, 2004. For a review of the attachment process in educational settings see Riley, 2009).
For this project it was hypothesized that experienced school principals (mentors) who could quickly form a strong working alliance with protégés (assistant principals and teacher leaders and experts) and articulate the working processes of relationships and solution-focused helping would increase the likelihood of accurate problem identification and therefore correct, rather than expedient solution generation by their protégés. Outlining the process of relationship formation and maintenance to mentors would increase their ability to understand the protégé’s situation and articulate the human processes involved in achieving leadership goals. Mentors who consciously adopted specific relational skills such as open questioning and active listening techniques would be more likely to help protégés clarify the issues that they deemed most important for their development as leaders. This hypothesis was generated from the literature related to evidence-based, time-limited counselling; specifically the work of Brown (2002), Egan (2002), Macnab (1991), Mann (1991), and Molnos (1995).

Mentors were to be taught how to facilitate significant and sometimes difficult conversations with their protégé. Mentoring conversations are relatively easy to facilitate when everything is going well – any experienced principal would be able to undertake such a role without specific training. However, the skills of managing difficult conversations can and should be learned by mentors, as they allow the mentor some comfort in knowing they are prepared when sticky situations arise.

Just as the context in which mentors work is important, so are the attitudes and perceptions of both the mentors and protégés. It is easy in a mentoring situation to have an unequal distribution of power. This is particularly true in an education system that is already hierarchical in nature. As a result, it was important to alert the mentors to this and provide a structure for equal power sharing. The program design was therefore conceived as a protégé-centred stance, a derivative of the person-centred approach to education first developed by Carl Rogers (e.g., Rogers, 1990; Rogers, Kirschenbaum, & Henderson, 1989). This has been shown to be ‘above average compared with other educational innovations for cognitive and especially affective and behavioural outcomes’ in a meta-analysis of 119 studies from 1948–2004, sampling 355,325 students (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 113).

The final consideration in the construction of the program was the issue of time, or more specifically, time-limitation. Both leader/mentors and the protégés are busy people. So for mentoring to be effective, it had to be done efficiently, without time wasted on superficialities. This is not easily achieved, especially if the two people do not know each other well, or even at all, before the first meeting. After reviewing the literature on time-limitation in other relational fields, it emerged as a crucial aspect of this program – both a means and an end. Time-limitation ensures the whole of the mentoring process begins, and progresses with the end in mind. This knowledge generates an underlying sense of the importance of progression. As the time together is limited, it should not be wasted by either party. It has been widely reported that this produces significant benefits: deepening and strengthening the relationship while maintaining the focus on the desired outcome (Brown, 2002; Levenson, 2004; Mann, 1981; Molnos, 1995). However, potential stresses caused by the mentoring process will also be limited.

Time-limited therapy is known to increase the levels of iatrogenic anxiety: that is, the anxiety about the process of the encounter. In a mentoring relationship, iatrogenic anxiety enables a clearer focus on the issues that the protégé needs to address but remain undisclosed due to potential embarrassment or shame. An example may help explain how this operates.
Difficult conversations, particularly where some intimate disclosure is involved (e.g. a mistake that caused some sort of embarrassment) are difficult to begin, and the protagonists often find it easier to skirt around rather than directly address the central issue. In professional settings these conversations occur with some form of time-limitation (e.g., one of the parties has to leave to attend to another matter). Often the impending end of the meeting triggers the disclosure of the discomforting information that had been previously avoided. In many one-on-one meetings, important information is not discussed until the last five minutes because the iatrogenic anxiety induced by the time-limiting process (awareness that the meeting is coming to an end) increases beyond the level of anxiety associated with the self-disclosure and possible feelings of embarrassment or shame that might result. Without the time-limitation, the information may never have been disclosed. So, by focusing at the outset on the limited time for mentoring, iatrogenic anxiety is used to facilitate progress.

There are of course other factors involved in whether a protégé will reveal important information – in particular, the level of trust afforded to the mentor. Protégés will only reveal sensitive information to a mentor who can withhold judgment while the protégé works through the issue. This is true of all judgments in the mind of the protégé. A mentor who is quick to judge positively is also likely to be quick with negative judgments in different circumstances. Thus, if negative judgments undermine the level of trust in a relationship, Kegan and Lahey (2001) point out that by implication positive judgments do too. Trust, and therefore judgments, determines the strength of the working alliance that can be formed between the mentor and protégé. The strength of the working alliance is the best predictor of a successful mentoring relationship (Awaya et al., 2003; Bouquillon, Sosik, & Lee, 2005; Hargreaves, 2002).

**Tools of the trade: the working alliance**

The fundamental core condition of all-effective mentoring is the working alliance formed between the protagonists. This assumption underpins the development of the program structure and skills taught to the mentors. As stated above, it was appropriated from the significant corpus of work by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1951, 1989) and those who followed him, such as Egan (2002) who introduced the ideas of solution-focused helping. Rogers’ working alliance is frequently acknowledged as vital by many current theorists, even those espousing cognitive behavioural approaches to change, the traditional opponents to the person-centred approach (Josefowitz & Myran, 2006). The reason that the working alliance is crucial in the mentoring setting is that, coupled with a structured series of meetings, it provides the opportunity for the protégé to explore safely their unconscious functioning through an exploration of their core professional anxiety. This involves three tasks:

1. the task of identifying the unknown that which needs to become known;
2. the role of anxiety as the guardian, so to speak, of that which is being kept unknown; and
3. the creation of the mental reflective space required for its emergence. (Eisold, 2000, p. 62)

The structure of the sessions brings together all of the elements needed to conduct a thorough interview series, in such a way that important information is not lost through neglect or defence, while leaving open the possibilities for flexibly discussing
the protégé’s offerings in the conversation. The preparation for each encounter was noted by Macnab (1991) as an important aspect of the work by both parties. It promotes both growth and flexibility in the protégé by looking for the identification of triggers, feelings and strategies for coping with the leadership environment they have decided to enter, and the environment in which they may be in by others.

The final measure of an effective mentoring relationship is that it helps to produce well-informed and well-rounded school leaders. When the protégé performs the leadership role without the need of a mentor, the work of the mentor is completed despite the fact that the relationship may continue. In this sense, it is not unlike a parenting relationship: facilitation of growth in the protégé whilst ‘letting them go’. Thus, effective mentors ‘empathically fail’ their protégé (Winnicott, 1993, 2002) allowing protégés to take over their long-term leadership direction gradually. A review of the literature around this conception of leadership revealed increasing research in large organizations, with significant implications for educational leadership (see Davidovitz et al., 2007; Popper, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Popper & Lipshitz, 1992; Popper & Mayseless, 2003; Shamir, Zakay, Brainin, & Popper, 2000). This research also informed the mentoring methods developed.

Methods and techniques

The program was designed to be experiential. The trainee mentors were taught active listening and other skills during professional development sessions. After the outlining of each skill, the participants practised in small groups of four (quad groups) that remained together for the whole of the training phase. In these sessions each participant took on the role of mentor once, protégé once and observer twice. The quad group provided feedback at the end of each practice session on the specific skill and during the course of the workshops, all six sessions of the model were outlined and practised in vivo. This covered two of the three impediments to successful mentoring identified in the literature: insufficient time and mentor’s skill (Ehrich et al., 2004). The third impediment – personality clashes – was addressed through a partnership protocol that strongly encouraged mentors to select rather than take on an assigned protégé. This would allow them to develop their mentoring skills with a supportive protégé so their learning could be the focus. The program design included skills in creating a strong working alliance in spite of personality differences, but this was to be avoided during the mentors’ skill learning phase. Once the skills were internalised by the mentors, mentors would cope more easily with a relationship constructed by a third party (as exists in the DEECD mentoring programs).

A time-limited mentoring process was adapted from brief, integrated, and time-limited therapy. The process, named Contextual Insight-Navigated Discussion (CIND: pronounced kIND; Riley, 2007) is based firstly on the principles of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982, 1988). CIND mentoring consists of six focused mentoring meetings. The process is structured to ensure that the significant issues are addressed through flexible discussion based on the protégé’s goals. CIND promotes growth within both protégé and mentor, by identification and exploration of the protégé’s specific context. CIND had previously been successful in improving teacher practice when the author introduced it to teachers as part of his doctoral research.

Time-limitation places the mentoring relationship in ‘adult’ (fixed, progressing and future-focused) rather than ‘child’ (endless and changeless) time (Mann, 1981). Many
bad habits and unhelpful behaviours are defensive attempts to keep a person feeling safe in child time and are likely to emerge during times of stress, such as taking on a new leadership role for the first time (Brown, 2002; Molnos, 1995). Other structures of the sessions were also fixed. The series of discussions are always six, one-hour-long sessions. Each session has a specific and distinct developmental focus, builds on previous sessions and adds new content to deepen the understandings gained. The detailed structure of each session is outlined (see Table 1). The specific focus is to guide both mentor and protégé through all the aspects of the mentoring relationship, including the more sensitive and difficult areas than might be avoided without a structure for the pair to follow.

Participation in the training program consisted of two online surveys (pre- and post-workshops) to determine mentoring capability pre- and post-involvement. There were also three days of formal workshops. Initially participants (experienced school leaders) attended a two-day workshop, after which they began to work independently with a protégé (an assistant principal looking to take the next step into school leadership or a leading or expert teacher) using the six 60-minute session model. They attended one hour of small group supervision/review (10 to 12 participants) with the researcher during that period. A third workshop was delivered after each participant had completed approximately three of the six mentoring sessions. This professional development opportunity was designed to extend the learning from the first workshop in light of direct experiences with individual protégés.

Participants were also required to reflect on the process individually once they had completed the six sessions with a protégé and submit a 500-word meta-reflection of the process. These data were used for triangulation with other aspects of the program in order to help determine its success or otherwise. Follow-up interviews with a sample of participants to deepen the investigation of the impact of the program on the participants post-delivery will occur in late 2009.

**Participants**

Elementary school principals constituted the majority of the cohort (76.6%) with the remainder a mix of secondary (junior college: 12.2%) and P-12 (7.8%) school principals. The mean level of experience for the participants was 27.59 years. Most (83%)
had previously mentored at least one colleague before attending the workshop. Overwhelmingly, the initial survey data showed that the participants had the desire to develop their communication skills, with listening skills rated three times more important than any other single skill.

About a third of the protégés were in the same school as the mentors and already part of the school leadership team. The mentors reported that using the six-session model was a good way to leave the day-to-day issues behind and help focus the protégé on ‘over the horizon thinking’. The rest of the protégés worked in nearby schools in the same region (there are nine regions in Victoria, four city-based around the capital city, Melbourne, and five rural regions where travelling distances even within the same region can be quite large). The program was designed for a mentor and protégé who did not know each other initially, but this was not the case for about half of the dyads. One principal used the sessions as a vehicle for working with a new teacher to her school who was under-performing.

**Data sources**

Data were collected from 90 experienced school leaders (modal age group 50 to 54 years; range 30 – 55+; see Figure 1) who took part in the workshops at a Melbourne hotel and undertook the mentoring sessions at convenient locations across the state. In the principal cohort there were 60 females and 30 males drawn from nine regions across Victoria who volunteered to attend the workshops and to complete a full mentoring program with a protégé using the model before the end of the 2008 academic year. Information was obtained at five different time periods during the program. Survey data included an initial survey as a condition of entry to the program (100% response rate); post Workshop 1 (89% response rate) and post Workshop 2 (67% response rate). Qualitative data was collected from all participants via audio-recorded small group interviews (86% response rate) and participants’ written meta-reflections submitted after completing the program (42% response rate). The variations in response rates were partly due to attrition between the workshops. A number of principals were unable to attend Workshop 2 for a variety of reasons not associated with the program itself: some changed jobs, others had to prioritise dual departmental obligations on the day and yet others had to deal with unforeseen crises in their schools involving students, parents or teachers. In addition, experience in delivering other programs has shown that it can be difficult to lure principals from their schools for extended periods, particularly when attendance at a workshop involves as much as six hours of additional travel each way, even when accommodation is provided.

**Analysis**

A mixed-method analysis of participant responses was employed. Numerical and open data were captured from pre- and post-workshop surveys, transcripts of the small group interviews and participants’ meta-reflections submitted at the end of the first mentoring partnership employing the CIND model taught in the workshops. On the whole, participants were supportive of the program, with a number reporting it was ‘the best professional development I have ever done’. On a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants rated the program as follows (see Table 2).
Clearly there was support for the program from the participants. The qualitative data reported in the next section identifies key themes that emerged from analysis of participants’ written responses and small group interviews during their engagement with the program.

**Mentors both provide and need support**

The participants’ level of experience in school settings allowed for rich conversations to occur during the program. As each quad group remained intact for the whole of the program they were able to deepen and strengthen their professional relationships. They were, in effect, mentoring each other while learning about the process. This was seen as a real strength of the program by the participants during the workshops (M=5.33/6) and emerged as a program strength in the small group support sessions as well. Having the quad groups pre-arranged by geographic region and keeping them together for the whole of the program achieved a level of comfort that allowed greater depth in their explorations of the process. They were mirroring the developmental nature of the mentor/protégé relationship, by building trust in each other during the quad group sessions. Participants appreciated the chance to catch up with each other, swap stories of progress (collaboratively brainstorming ideas to overcome difficulties or blocks to progress) and reflect on their mentoring style as they discussed each

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**Table 2. Participant evaluation of the mentoring skills workshop.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General evaluation questions</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After participating in this workshop I have a better understanding of ways I can develop my mentoring capabilities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>.819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident that I know what is expected of me in my work with the protégé</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>.851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My capacity to address the challenges of mentoring has increased through my participation in the workshop</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>.775</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning

mentor’s progress through the six-session model. This added depth to conversations during the workshops and small group supervision.

The effect of the supportive quad group structure was summed up by one participant as ‘the opportunity to network, debrief and work collaboratively with my group was very worthwhile. This has given me confidence to really extend myself.’ Another found the ‘slower pace’ of the workshop program allowed her ‘the opportunity to share issues/insights with colleagues’ and reflected that ‘a lot of the learnings are more deeply discussed/unpacked during these times.’ A third participant reported that the ‘greater building of trust’ within the group over time allowed her to participate in ‘richer discussions’ that increased her understanding of the crucial role of support in facilitating growth.

Experiential learning is powerful for school leaders

This theme emerged strongly from all data sources and was best summed up by one participant who reported that ‘it was great we didn’t get spoken at all day’. Teaching new skills to leaders with an average of 27 years’ experience in a ‘stand and deliver mode’ (or what Mockler (2005) termed ‘spray-on’ professional development) would most likely have failed. Leaders of this stature want to try out new skills as soon as they can. The quad group practice sessions facilitated this. This element emerged from the small group meetings conducted after the workshops. Even though participants rated the quad sessions consistently high (M=4.44/5, 4.51/5, 5.06/6 on days one to three respectively) once the mentors began working with real protégés, they reported that the importance of the quad group sessions during the workshops was underlined for them.

A few participants thought quad sessions went on too long and offered suggestions for more variety, including such ideas as ‘films – stop – discuss – continue’ or ‘cue cards’. The ‘round robin’ session, in which one participant played the role of protégé while six mentors took turns to facilitate the discussion observed by the rest of the cohort, was a successful variant. One participant described as useful the experience of seeing others ‘actually experience the challenges’ of mentoring. While the experiential nature was appreciated, it was often the debriefing at the end of sessions that appeared to be most valuable. This was summed up by one participant as ‘our final quad group this morning really came together – fantastic observations and discussion eventuated’.

Structure provides security

A common theme that emerged from the small groups and the meta-reflections was that the structure of the mentoring sessions, made transparent at the outset to both mentors and protégés, acted as a ‘container’ – to borrow Winnicott’s (2002) term – for both parties in the dyad. The boundaries provided by the structure allowed the mentors to feel secure in conducting the session without feeling obliged to provide the content. One participant, who had previously mentored many teachers, reported:

The big difference is structure. The ‘mentoring matters’ program has a specific number of required meetings, with a specific goal for each meeting. This is something totally different to the way I have previously conducted any mentoring type meetings. They have usually been ad hoc meetings to discuss specific issues relating to school issues, often with me providing advice or ‘the answer’.
Another found the structure of the sessions aided focus on the protégé’s development:

Because I know my protégé very well, it would be easy to become distracted or move away from the focus without a structure to work from…. I have a tendency to go ‘off’ track. My mantra throughout was ‘developing others’.

**Who sets the agenda?**

There was significant emphasis placed on the use of questioning as a tool of control. In one quad session, participants were asked to refrain from questioning of any kind so that the protégé would be more likely to set the course of the conversation. Principals who are used to making many decisions each day and announcing them are so enmeshed in the agenda-setting process that many found this exercise quite challenging, but did see the value once they overcame their frustration. Explicit teaching of mentoring skills, such as reading body language, active listening and non-questioning/agenda setting within a carefully framed scaffold, was strongly appreciated. All participants reported that they had developed a range of these skills, particularly related to active listening. Furthermore, many participants reported that these skills have transferred into their daily practice as school leaders. This emerged as the strongest theme in the small group supervision visits conducted after the program workshops and was best summed up by an experienced principal who reported that being asked to ‘focus on body language … and questioning versus non-questioning [is] very critical but often overlooked’.

**Emerging challenges**

One of the major challenges identified by many of the principals was described as ‘that itching, burning desire to give answers’. Most identified the ability to ‘switch off’ from the principal role and into the mentoring role as a significant challenge early on but became easier – but not easy – with time and practice. For example, one participant reported:

I think it’s a very different role too [mentoring]. We see ourselves as good teachers, but being a mentor is entirely different. So it’s a very new, very big learning experience, figuring out how to do it and figuring out how to stay a mentor and not the teacher [who says] ‘Yep, do this, do that’.

Another participant explained that ‘the hardest part is holding back opinions and ideas. This is what we get paid to do and to restrain is always difficult.’ One participant described active listening as ‘particularly helpful’ as a technique for ‘the holding back of opinions. My inclination is always to suggest my way of doing things so to have the focus on not doing this was really good’, but added ruefully ‘the strength required to act in this way was a challenge for me’.

**A significant interest in burnout**

The program included a brief lecture on the signs and signals of burnout, a significant problem for both teachers and school leaders. Participants expressed a strong desire to find out more about this area.
Meta-reflection: a theme in absentia

It was interesting to note the response rate (42%) of participants with regard to the meta-reflection component. Clearly this was a burdensome requirement for many participants as a few clear hours were needed to complete one well. Perhaps this was too much to ask of busy principals who had already committed at least 18 to 25 hours to the program outside of attending the workshops. The schedule also required submission at the end of the school year when principals are particularly busy. The other point of interest is that the information contained in the meta-reflections appeared mainly to repeat information shared during the small group supervision sessions and may therefore represent a redundant component of the course. More investigation into the reasons for non-submission will be needed to answer this question. Follow-up interviews planned for the end of this year will address this.

Changes beyond the mentoring relationship

The application of the questioning and listening strategies taught to mentors to other areas of the job was widespread. A number of participants described trying to listen more and talk less in whole school and other committee meetings, and many reported being surprised by what they learnt by adopting this strategy. A significant proportion of those who did adopt this new way of relating to staff, parents, students and other stakeholders had recognized that these techniques were not new at all. The workshop days had simply alerted the principals to the fact that they had used them previously but for reasons either unknown or not reported had discontinued their use. One participant summed it up this way: ‘Being aware of the need for active listening and to give others the courtesy of “wait time” was very valuable…. I found it was valuable in my professional conversations and during meetings.’ Another now uses ‘phrases rather than questions to tease out their [staff] thoughts … in performance reviews’. One participant ‘reminded [him]self of these strategies in meetings and professional discussions as I know that I tend to answer my own questions without giving others the “wait time” they deserve.’

One very experienced principal reported a significant change in her ability to remain present to the situation at hand, to support rather than lead her protégé, and to allow time for ‘slowing down, taking note and internalising the issues’ rather than remaining distracted by the multiple tasks on her to do list. She also noted that ‘holding back a string of advice was a useful skill to develop [and] led to my protégé suggesting solutions herself which was a far better way for her and for me.’

Discussion

The mentoring training provided to experienced principals has appeared to have been successful in building the skills and confidence to mentor. While the aims were focused on the skill development of the mentors, a surprising finding, albeit preliminary, is that there appears to have been a benefit in terms of the health and wellbeing of both mentors and protégés. By acknowledging the fundamental need for protégés’ to address the big issues confronting them as beginning school leaders in a confidential setting with an experienced school leader, the underlying message of the program was that both mentors and protégés are important people who need, and positively respond to, support. One participant articulated it this way:
Some of my colleagues told me when I got back to school that I looked like I had a whole lot more energy, that I seemed so much happier, that I got obviously so much out of it.

This effect on wellbeing may have been a function of the logistics of the program rather than the structure of the course. All participants were able to spend at least one night in the hotel where the program was delivered, most of the participants from remote areas spent two nights. This ‘pampering’ rather than the course of study could have been the cause of a refreshed look when returning to school. However, it is also true that one of the premises of the program was that support is best provided by ensuring the mentors acquire a skill base that can be directly applied to the mentoring relationship in a structured way. This also builds confidence along with mentoring efficacy. This will also need careful investigation during follow-up interviews.

By providing specific mentoring training to experienced principals, and giving them practice in stepping out of the principal role – where they are constantly required to make judgments – and into a mentoring role in which they adopted a non-judgmental stance, was a significant challenge for the participants in the course. When they were able to do this, they reported that it allowed both parties to perform to their capacity, and that the issues that needed to be addressed were explored in depth rather than superficial solutions searched for. The hope is that this allows the teachers and students in their schools to perform at their best because the new leader is fully engaged in the true educative process. Research conducted for the DEECD has found that school leadership is the second most important influence on student outcomes behind the quality of teachers (Department of Education Victoria, 2007). This has also been reported internationally (Leithwood & Day, 2008) Therefore, the importance of leadership development is crucial as it directly addresses the issue of improving student outcomes.

Conclusion and future directions
While the results reported are preliminary, they are largely positive. Longer-term follow-up has been planned to investigate whether the initial findings can be sustained over time, which will be vital for system-wide leadership sustainability. What can be argued as a result of the first phase of this project though is that this type of mentoring can enhance school leadership development by helping to develop the capability of the mentors. The mentor assists in the development of the whole person from within, rather than providing a ‘box of tricks’.

It remains to be seen how many protégés the new mentors will take on post-involvement in the training and whether the skills learned will be sustained over time. However, all expressed a desire to continue with this important work, which is a significant commitment from busy people, and that is a good start.

Endnote
Following direct feedback about the program benefits from participants to the DEECD, they have requested the development and roll-out of a second mentoring program running in parallel to this one. The new program is to be based on the model outlined in this article but extended from solo principals to include whole leadership teams. This demonstrates both a strong vote of confidence in the model developed and a department that listens to their constituents.
Notes on the contributor

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References


