MENTORING CAN BENEFIT BOTH NEW AND EXPERIENCED PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS

Practice makes professionals

TRISHA CRAIG

Last week’s announcement by the Lien Foundation and St. James’ Church Kindergarten that they would be launching a new Practicum Centre for pre-service pre-school teachers heralds a welcome addition to the early childhood education sector.

Designed to provide high-quality mentoring to student teachers during their mandatory classroom teaching, the new centre hopes to enhance the practical skill set of young teachers and help set the stage for a satisfying career as pre-school professionals.

Particularly now, when the pre-school sector is facing a tremendous shortage of qualified talent and an above average annual attrition rate of between 15 and 20 per cent, finding models that encourage people to enter and remain in the field is critical.

High-quality mentoring, such as that envisioned by the centre, is key.

BENEFITS OF MENTORING

One of the important things that mentoring in any field does is help trainees translate what they have learnt into practical solutions and actions in real-world settings. When new young professionals struggle to integrate what they know with how to act, mentors can guide them both by modelling successful strategies and helping them become reflective practitioners.

Rather than simply offering corrections, when mentors watch their mentees in action and later discuss with them what worked, what did not and what might have, they allow their charges to figure things out for themselves and develop their own repertoire of professional skills.

Indeed, in a Swedish study of mentoring in school, the author discovered that novice teachers found the single most important benefit was the opportunity to discuss and analyse classroom situations with their more experienced colleagues.

At the same time, mentoring is not a one-way street — mentors also gain from the relationship and, in the long run, so will the organisation or profession.

New trainees bring to the field fresh insights and the latest thinking they have acquired from their studies. Seasoned professionals who are open to new ideas and the enthusiasm of the young may find their own practice enhanced and updated as a result of being a mentor.

The system as a whole also benefits from strong mentorship programmes. Research shows that children with young teachers tend to perform better academically when their teachers have been mentored, presumably because it has made them better at classroom instruction.

Some evidence also suggests retention rates of teachers who have been mentored are higher — an important finding for systems in which teacher turnover is a problem.

Professionalisation is one of the great benefits of mentoring and we see this in many fields besides education, such as law and medicine. By pairing students or new graduates with veteran practitioners, beginners are able to develop a sense of the norms, values and codes of conduct that define a profession.

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF PROFESSIONALISM

In terms of early childhood education, practicum experiences that combine mentoring that is focused on developing teaching skills and a greater attachment to the profession may not only help boost retention rates, but also attract a higher percentage of students to the profession.

In a survey I conducted last year of more than 400 diploma-level students in Singapore studying to be early childhood educators, I found that fewer than half of them considered themselves “very likely” to enter the profession.

While this figure seems high, other countries grapple with the same phenomenon. Research in Taiwan that almost three-quarters of students in four-year early childhood education degree programmes had no plans to continue in the field after graduation.

Still, it is worth examining the causes. Students were asked to rate the importance of various possible reasons why some of their peers chose not to enter the profession. Generally, regardless of their future plans, students tended to have similar views of factors such as low salaries as explanations to why their counterparts took other career paths after graduation.

However, it turns out that there were two areas where respondents who were very unlikely to teach preschool (in other words, non-teachers) differed in their views on why students decided not to teach, compared with respondents who planned to enter the profession (likely teachers). The areas were the practicum (300 hours of compulsory teaching students do in preschools as part of their training) and professional autonomy.

More than half (56 per cent) of the non-teachers thought the practicum was a “very important” reason students did not pursue a teaching career, compared with just more than a third of the likely teachers who felt that way. This suggests that, perhaps, an unhappy experience in the practicum led some students to think of alternative careers.

In addition, issues of the profession loomed larger for non-teachers. They were twice as likely (37 per cent) to see the lack of professional autonomy as a “very important” reason people dropped out of the early childhood sector, compared with the likely teachers (18 per cent).

It may be that without a clear idea of a professional trajectory, some students declined to pursue the career for which they had been trained.

Typically, the conversation about attracting and retaining early childhood educators revolves around matters of compensation. Certainly, no one expects trained teachers to work for a pittance, but these data highlight non-monetary issues that are very pertinent to teachers’ career decisions. Well-designed interventions such as mentoring schemes can help address them.

Developing programmes and institutions, such as the Practicum Centre, that focus on giving pre-service teachers a strong sense of professional identity and tools to hone their craft may alleviate some of the current shortages faced by the system.

Source: © 2014 Mediacorp Press Ltd. Article first appeared in TODAY.