

## CHAPTER 11

# Peer Mentoring as a Means of Leader Support in Early Childhood Education and Care

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### Abstract

Mentoring has become a valuable tool in supporting professionals. However, despite the benefits of mentoring, mentoring in early childhood education (ECE) has been paid only limited attention. The chapter is based on a research project focusing on peer mentoring as a means of leader support in Finnish ECE. The purpose of the project was to implement a peer mentoring programme to develop mentoring for leaders. During the programme, 21 leaders working in ECE were trained to start working as peer mentors for leaders in ECE. Learning activities during the programme required participants to start peer mentoring in their own professional contexts. The study investigates peer mentors' experiences of peer mentoring related to their mentoring process with their mentees. Qualitative data were obtained through focus group interviews investigating the peer mentors' experiences of the peer mentoring. The findings show that peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECE. Peer mentoring provided a safe space to discuss professional issues and dilemmas and is characterised by collegial and

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reciprocal relationships. The results enhance our understanding of peer mentoring from the perspective of the peer mentors.

**Keywords:** peer mentoring, peer mentor, leader, early childhood education

## Introduction

Leaders in early childhood education (ECE) develop their professional competence within increasingly changing policies, complex functions, and practices. In Finland, recent years have seen a rapidly changing field and work environment in ECE (Halttunen & Waniganayake, 2021; Hjelt & Karila, 2017). Working life is moreover being increasingly characterised by multiple uncertainties and time pressures (Kupila et al., 2018; Pascal & Bertram, 2018). Leadership in ECE has a long tradition, but it varies in its implementation (Hujala et al., 2013; Strehmel et al., 2019). Many of the demands, changes, and challenges of the work environment may confuse and influence leaders' professional identity construction processes.

Hujala (2013) argues that in practice leadership has been a fairly elusive phenomenon. Moen and Granrusten (2013) define four functions that must be taken care of in early childhood education (ECE) centres, namely pedagogical, staff, administrative, and strategic leadership functions. Halttunen (2013) defines elements that should be considered in the determination of leadership in ECE organisations. These elements include employees' individual needs for leadership, the role of the teams, and how the leadership is arranged at the municipal level. The study in Finland, Japan, and Singapore (Hujala et al., 2016) revealed that the tasks of ECE leaders in all three countries are similar—the two most important leadership tasks being pedagogical leadership and human resource management—although implementation of tasks varied according to the cultural context. Waniganayake (2013) affirms that although there is widespread agreement on the necessity for leader preparation, the appropriate ways to cultivate ECE leaders are decidedly debatable.

Building a career as a leader is an ongoing process (Waniganayake, 2013). In its current state, ECE needs leader support (e.g. Karila & Kupila, 2010). Mentoring has become a valuable tool in supporting professionalism and professional development throughout the teaching career (see Geeraerts et al., 2015; Hudson, 2013) and mentoring

programmes in ECE are proliferating. However, despite the benefits of mentoring, the nature and extent of mentoring in ECE are still ill-defined, and mentoring in ECE has been paid only limited attention in Finland. Thus, research on improving mentoring in ECE practice is still in its infancy. In addition, the term ‘mentoring’ has multiple meanings.

This chapter is based on a research project focusing on peer mentoring as a means of ECE centre leader support in ECE. The purpose of the project was to implement a peer mentoring programme designed to develop peer mentoring as a means to support ECE leaders. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate peer mentors’ views of mentoring related to their peer mentoring process with their mentees. The research question was how peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECE.

### **Peer Mentoring as a Framework for Mentoring**

Mentoring can be viewed as a considerable professional development process in ECE, and as a valuable means of facilitating learning, cultivating skills, and promoting career development (Aubrey, 2011; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2015). Wong and Waniganayake (2013, p. 163) define mentoring as ‘a facilitated process involving two or more individuals that have a shared interest in professional learning and development’. Mentoring is also emphasised as an aid to the development of professional identity (e.g. Rippon & Martin, 2003). Besides, mentoring is claimed to facilitate the mentee’s induction into the culture of the profession (in this case, leadership) and into the specific local context (here, ECE) (see Hobson et al., 2009). Further, mentoring is seen as a part of socialisation to leadership roles (Daresh, 2004) and has also become part of quality assurance (Braybrook, 2019, p. 46). As a process, mentoring is defined as a dynamic interpersonal relationship (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013). Braybrook (2019) found that developing professional networks outside of the workplace was effective in increasing professional confidence.

Many efforts have been made to emphasise the importance of peer support in the field of educational administration (Daresh, 2004). In this chapter, mentoring is specifically framed in terms of peer mentoring. Research has shown the value and relevance of peer mentoring and of peer mentorship as a form of mentoring (Doran et al., 2018;

Kupila & Karila, 2018). In a peer group, a mentor is assigned to a small group of mentees. In the context of leadership in ECE, the peer group may be a focus group composed of leaders. As such, peer mentoring involves participants who are relative equals in terms of institutional hierarchy or position (see Angelique et al., 2002). The group members are at a similar stage in their professional development and serve as peer mentors to each other while working on common interests and professional issues (e.g. Angelique et al., 2002). Peer mentoring is a means to support leaders' well-being at work and the working community (see Certo, 2005). It is also important to consider how the mentoring is incorporated within the ECE centre's management structures besides explicit leadership responsibilities (Braybrook, 2019).

In peer mentoring, all participants usually have something of value to contribute and gain from each other (Angelique et al., 2002; Kupila & Karila, 2018). Exchanges with peers may thus be experienced as less threatening, and more open and authentic relationships may be formed (Johnson, 2007). Jipson and Paley (2000) argue that collaboration and mentoring are often closely intertwined. Thus, the theoretical concept of peer mentoring emphasises it as being a shared and reciprocal activity (Gabriel & Kaufield, 2008; Pennanen et al., 2015).

Geeraerts et al. (2015) define the peer-group mentoring model as based on the ideas of socio-constructivism, dialogue, and knowledge sharing involving integrated self-regulative support, peer support, mentor support, and expert support (Geeraerts, 2015, p. 363). Today, mentoring is increasingly used to refer to collaboration and dialogue (Heikkinen et al., 2012). Dialogue is associated with the requirement for equality; the participants in parties to the dialogue treat each other as equals. Individuals are equal as human beings, even if they are unequal in terms of expertise. In a dialogic relationship, no one has a better or more valid perspective than any other, but both acknowledge the incompleteness of their perceptions (Karjalainen et al., 2006).

The challenge for the mentee is not to expect ready-made instructions and advice from the peer mentor. Meaning and interpretation are built together with the mentor. Mentees should not expect mentors to do anything on their behalf but should take responsibility for their own development (Karjalainen et al., 2006). The peer mentor also learns through discussion with the mentee (Kupila & Karila, 2018).

In a mentoring relationship, leaders in ECE can structure and clarify their responsibilities and peer mentors can help leaders to focus

on their professional future, and likewise on how leaders can move their subordinates forward. During the agreed meetings with the peer mentor, issues related to professional skills and special competencies are discussed. Mentoring has also been found to be important in the construction of stakeholder structures. In ECE, the peer mentor can be a support in pedagogical leadership. Braybrook (2019) emphasises that more attention is needed for mentoring of new graduates and establishing national guidelines for mentoring.

## Study Context

This sub-study is part of a larger research project entitled *Mentoring and Learning Partnership in Early Childhood Education and Care 2017–2020*, where mentoring was developed to support the professional development of ECE professionals at different stages of their working lives. The project aimed to create a peer mentoring model suitable for ECE environments and was created in cooperation with the worlds of education and work. Partners from the work field include the six municipalities and their respective ECE centres. The purpose of this sub-study is to investigate the experiences of peer mentoring among 21 peer mentors also working as leaders in ECE. Particular focus was directed to the question of how peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECE.

All participants worked as leaders in ECE. The size of the units they led varied. Participants' work experience ranged from 3 years to 18 years. The average work experience of the participants was 9 years. Two of the mentors were men and the rest were women. Participants came from six municipalities of different sizes. Municipalities represented administrative organisations of various sizes as well as regional diversity.

During the mentoring programme, leaders were trained to work as mentors and started to work as peer mentors in ECE in their respective municipalities. The mentor training consisted of nine seminar days and learning tasks. These tasks required participants to reflect on material presented. Mentor training was based on the dialogue and reflection components. These components were supported by peer group activities and by feedback given by trainers. Mentors were also supposed to start peer mentoring with the mentees in their own professional context or municipality. Peer mentoring with the mentees was

to start while the training was ongoing, and the mentees were leaders or deputy leaders in the ECE context. Peer mentoring practices were explored in the groups of mentees (max. four persons) or individually. The steering group of the programme was structured in such a way that its representatives were from the six municipalities in which the participants were employed.

## Method

Qualitative data were collected from the peer mentoring programme process. Thus, 21 peer mentors took part in 6 focus group interviews. Each focus group consisted of three to four peer mentor leaders. The focus in the interviews was on the peer mentors' experiences of working as a mentor, mentoring progress, and the development of the process. The interviews lasted approximately 70 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analysed thematically (Roulston, 2001). Thematic analysis is a method for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Being thematic, the analysis seeks to identify important themes emerging from the description of the phenomenon. The analysis consists of different phases: first, familiarisation with the data; second, generating initial codes; third, searching for themes; fourth, reviewing the themes; fifth, defining and naming the themes; and last, producing the report (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In this study, themes were used to capture important aspects of the data in relation to the facilitators and benefits of peer mentoring, its contribution to leadership, and its characteristic defining features in the process of mentoring (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis attempted to describe the essential details of the mentors' experiences of the peer mentoring process with their mentees. Thematic analysis reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of the phases of peer mentoring progress. The characteristics of the working context were also examined. In order to gain insight into the data as a whole, all interview transcripts were read and studied several times.

This study has potential limitations. The number of participants was small, but the richness of the data was enhanced by the fact that the participants came from six different municipalities. In addition, the aim of the research was to increase understanding and describe the nature of the peer mentoring process and how peer mentoring can

support ECE leaders, rather than being generalisable. The study was also conducted at a particular time when the creation of mentoring practices in the study municipalities was in its infancy.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The issue of mentoring touches on sensitive issues, and the author is aware of the possible repercussions of writing about leaders' peer mentoring and work experiences. A guarantee of confidentiality was therefore given to the interviewees, stating that all personal information would be treated in strictest confidence, that no actual names would be used to ensure adequate protection of privacy, and that no ECE centres would be identifiable in the reporting. All research data would be stored securely and would be password protected. Participation in the research was essentially voluntary. Participants were seen as subjects with rights. Merrill and West (2009, p. 168) emphasise that the researcher has to treat research subjects as 'full human beings: knowing, creative subjects in their own right, rather than as repositories of "data" to be extracted and understood by researchers alone'.

### **Findings**

This study used the frame of peer mentoring to explore how peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECE. During the focus group interviews, the peer mentors discussed and assessed their activities as peer mentors and also the peer mentoring process they led for their mentees. The findings show that peer mentoring facilitates leadership and indicate the potential of peer mentoring to support the work of an ECE leader. First, peer mentoring supports leaders' professional identity and also assumes the leaders' position in supporting emotional aspects in the process. Peer mentoring also offers a safe space to discuss pedagogical leadership and shared leadership. Peer mentoring is part of human resource management and well-being at work. Mentoring addresses everyday activities and seeks solutions to these. Second, in the peer mentoring relationship mentors and mentees are co-learners in a collegial relationship. Peer mentoring is important for both novice leaders and more experienced leaders. Further, peer mentoring provides mentees with peer support but is also meaningful for the peer mentors themselves.

## Supporting Professional Identity

Peer mentoring discussions support the construction of a mentee leader's professional identity. In the peer mentoring discussions, the mentees examine their position and positioning as leaders; they reflect on how to find their roles in the ECE work community and among its staff. Most of the mentees also have experience as ECE teachers working with groups of children, and this also confuses professional identity and assumes a position. Together with their peer mentors, the mentees form and enhance their own personal understanding of what defines them as leaders. Peer mentoring discussions involve making their skills and professional abilities known not only to themselves but to others involved in the peer mentoring context. The mentee and peer mentor together identify the elements of the role of the leader, and likewise the responsibilities and obligations. During the peer mentoring conversation, it is possible to verbalise, describe, analyse, and assess leaders' (mentees') professional actions. The following excerpts illustrate the basic premises of a multifaceted approach to leadership as follows:

I bring out really strongly the reflection on my own way of doing work, my own being, my own communication ... but as getting to know yourself [mentee]. How you act in different situations and how you react, so that just by getting to know yourself, you are able to develop yourself. It [mentoring] could open gates to getting to know yourself. (Leader mentor 19, F C 6)

... confirmation of leadership that you [mentee] now have this position, and you yourself make it your vision. (Leader mentor 3, F C 1)

... with my mentee, her own role and identity is where she desperately needs support, and encouragement to face different situations, take on situations and speak up. (Leader mentor 12, F C 4)

Exploring professional identity also entails reflection and constructing one's own leadership culture and finding one's own position in other administrative teams in the operating environment. Peer mentors believe that attachment to leadership can be supported by mentoring. Below, a peer mentor describes identity development in this context:

Professional identity develops all the time and by discussing and mirroring thoughts to another person's thoughts, that [identity] is constantly maintained. (Leader mentor 10, F C 3)

The topics of the peer mentoring discussions also concern leaders' job description, managing and prioritising one's own work, work organisation, and time management:

... use of time and when there is the time and what those tasks are during that time and whether they are urgent tasks or those that are not tied to schedules. (Leader mentor 2, F C 1)

The emotional elements encountered by leaders in their work and their professional development are also present in the mentoring discussions:

Those quite human emotional states that you scare, excite, get angry, annoy others, and the differences between our employees and co-workers. They [mentees] desperately wanted confirmation ... and to believe that over time everybody grows into it, and you can't be ready right away. And that it is just as challenging and amazing for us who have done this job for decades. (Leader mentor 2, F C 1)

Creating an ECE centre culture is seen as one of the leader's tasks and is discussed with the mentees in the peer mentoring sessions. A peer mentor describes this as follows:

Even if we have unified guidelines, each community still has its own style and way of doing it and those people will make it their house. So, it [culture] was considered and it would still be a good thing to discuss. (Leader mentor 3, F C 1)

Shared leadership and pedagogical leadership are also topics in peer mentoring. Discussions include practical perspectives, like discussion on pedagogical assessment methods, but the mentees also discuss the basic nature of these leadership paradigms. With their peer mentors, the mentees define their views of pedagogical leadership, as seen in the next excerpt:

While we discussed the job description, my novice [mentee] stressed that she realised that pedagogical leadership really includes everything she does now. She was worried of the time, when she ensures how much pedagogical leadership she can give and then we discussed it, and we

also discussed the planning and drafting shifts, how they, too, are essential parts of pedagogical leadership. So, it emerged sharply from my novice [mentee], she somehow saw the pieces that formed the whole picture. (Leader mentor 3, F C 1)

Human resource management is another topic that arises in mentoring. Human resource management includes team building and ideas on how to support good teamwork, besides discussion of the methods for assessing teamwork and team development. It also entails arranging staff shifts. Further, it comprises complex perspectives on work community interaction as seen in the following excerpts:

A lot of issues related to the interaction within the work community arise; it is the kind of topic that a mentee discusses. (Leader mentor 18, F C 5)

New leaders have wondered how much is required and expected from the leader, and ... challenging work ... has been debated ... how diverse individuals there are in the work community, and how these different individuals are led. (Leader mentor 13, F C 4)

Mentees also raise everyday problems in the discussions, including challenging client situations:

At his [mentee's] wish, we discussed how to face a challenging person in the work community. We reflected on his expert role as a leader, reinforced it, and endeavoured to find in him the courage to show more of his expertise in a constructive way. (Leader mentor 17, F C 5)

Further, peer mentoring is seen as an opportunity for preventive action for well-being at work that serves coping and empowerment.

### **Co-Learners in a Collegial Relationship**

The mentees are both novices and experienced leaders, but the topics they discuss are equally important to both, and both groups benefit from peer mentoring:

My mentee [experience] was very modest, she would have had every opportunity to bring out her experience and skills, but she didn't do so at all. She set herself on almost the same line as these novices. She said many times that she hadn't thought about that thing from that angle, or

that this is how this should go or how this should be done. And it does her good to think about these things again. (Leader mentor 2, F C 1)

The mentees develop shared knowledge in the mentoring relationships in the peer mentoring group. The relationship is based also on shared community interests. In the peer mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees are co-learners in collegial relationships. Having the same professional status as a leader, the peer mentors and mentees are aware of their common ground and of the diversity of practice in ECE. They share the same professional interests, which facilitates interaction. When faced with a problem, professionals view the situation from the perspective of their own profession (see Wenger, 1998). The representative of the same profession is better able to take issues into consideration.

Peer support is an essential part of the interaction, and the mentees also exchange a lot of ideas with each other. Peer mentors describe this as follows:

The very fact that a matter can be said out loud with someone else, and even if there is no solution to it, the important matter is to be aware of it together and then think about how we could somehow cope with it. In other words, mentoring is also a hugely important part of problem-solving, to speak out. (Leader mentor 10, F C 3)

It is the fact that you can think with your peers, so your own thoughts get support and become clearer, or the perspective expands. When you have to make decisions that sometimes have your own world of values in conflict, or you have to emphasise, as we all have an emphasis on financial matters, and then you are not able to act as you would like to act, then mentoring is most supportive. (Leader mentor 10, F C 3)

A small group is good because they [mentees] have a great need to get peer support and absorb ideas from others. (Leader mentor 16, F C 5)

They have the idea of holding peer meetings in the future by themselves. (Leader mentor 20, F C 6)

... exchange of know-how or tools. (Leader mentor 4, F C 1)

You can share things and hear the views of others on the same thing. (Leader mentor 20, F C 6)

Mentors themselves learn a lot in the mentoring process. Peer mentoring is also a significant learning experience for the peer mentors. The peer mentor becomes a ‘co-learner’ in the process. The mentors themselves feel that they receive different perspectives, which broadens their thinking. The fact that in the peer mentoring group the mentor has the opportunity to discuss matters with a younger colleague is also rewarding:

I found it interesting that the younger mindset and world opens up because we have different ages in the work community. I’ve got a lot from the discussions with younger colleagues, I have got new ways of thinking, you have to have an open mind to share things. (Leader mentor 11, F C 3)

... I reflected [on] my own leadership quite strongly, and I got a lot from them [mentees]. (Leader mentor 14, F C 4)

For once, it’s time to think and discuss, there are no discussion forums for leaders or opportunities to share thoughts and experiences. It is probably a problem for all cities and municipalities and for all their leaders that there is no time for such a common free debate. (Leader mentor 15, F C 4)

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the focus is on peer mentoring. It explores how peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECE. The results yield an understanding of the peer mentoring process from the perspective of the peer mentors. The findings reveal that peer mentoring supports leaders’ professional identity and the importance of leaders’ collegial relationship and the idea of working and developing as a co-learner.

Meaningful peer mentoring takes place within supportive mentorship, where leaders are given space to construct their professional identity and reflect on the role of being or becoming a leader (see also Geeraerts et al., 2015). Boerema (2011), for his part, points out that leadership is a personal task and that leaders need to be concerned for their well-being and given encouragement. Developing confidence as a professional leader in ECE can be seen as one of the key benefits of peer mentoring. Mentoring creates an opportunity to support leadership and strengthen leaders’ professional identity and competence,

and likewise the development of competence in social change and the prevailing work situation. As seen in the findings, issues raised in the discussions are also linked to the strategic issues of the organisation, not only the individuals' goals or issues.

The research contributes to the understanding of peer support for leaders in ECE. The results show the reciprocal nature of the mentoring relationship. Reciprocity calls to mind Le Cornu's (2005) observation that each person is at the same time a learner and a facilitator of the other person's learning. The results of the study show that effective peer mentoring also entails interaction between practitioners of different ages and professionals of different generations. As in Kupila and Karila (2018), the older professional generation will also benefit from engaging in peer mentoring relationships. Peer mentoring does not, therefore, merely involve the orientation of a young employee under the supervision of a senior colleague, as mentoring has traditionally been perceived (see Pennanen et al., 2015).

Dareesh (2004) points out that mentoring must be respected and given value as a legitimate approach to learning, otherwise it will not be successful. In light of the findings of this study, peer mentoring is a promising means of supporting and improving ECE leader practices. In ECE, it is important to create the structural and organisational structures and conditions in municipalities in which leaders' peer mentoring is possible. In future research, it would be important to explore how to develop peer mentors and what kinds of policies support mentoring processes.

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