Leadership Behaviors and Mentoring Effectiveness

Bing YAN¹,a*, Juan XU²,b, and Zhen WU³,c

¹1661 North Shengxin Rd, Jiading, SH, China, 201815
²1661 North Shengxin Rd, Jiading, SH, China, 201815
³No. 4 Middle School of Ganzian District, Jiangxi Province, China, 341000

*a_b_yan@u.pacific.edu, b_millexu@aliyun.com, c262744998@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Teacher Mentor, Mentee, Leadership Behavior, Contextual Factors.

Abstract. Good teacher mentors do not merely refer to expert teachers. They are the mentors who display various leadership behaviors and styles to encourage and support mentees in achieving their goals. This paper explores mentors’ leadership styles and behaviors in the Chinese education context. A qualitative research was designed and carried out. Analysis of the mentors’ responses to interview questions suggested that the mentors have been “leading” the less experienced new teachers into their new profession by using the non-authoritarian directive leadership behavior throughout the mentoring process. However, there still remain some contextual factors that may influence their effectiveness, including the lack of contextual supports and pretermision of training for the mentors.

Introduction

Over the past decades, teaching mentoring has come under the spotlight in education as many educators believe it is one of the key strategies to successfully induce new teachers into the profession [1]. More and more people have recognized its positive effects in changing young teachers to fit the profession and preparing them for the challenges that lie ahead.

Actually, this kind of relationship brings more benefits to the younger or less experienced teachers than many other professional development programs. It is assumed that by working closely with new teachers in the context of teaching, an expert teacher can facilitate the evolving of new teachers in the existing school culture [2]. Conversely, without any effective mentoring, new teachers may not be well suited to the educational context and face great challenges to deal with the diversity of academic work given to them. Undoubtedly, there is a dire need for mentoring to help new teachers meet these challenges.

However, a consensus is growing among researchers that a good mentor should not merely refer to an expert teacher. Apart from the outstanding professional qualities, some other qualities are equally significant to ensure an effective mentoring. One of the paramount, just as prior research suggests, is the variety of leadership behaviors or styles that mentors may exhibit while interacting with mentees [3, 4, 5]. Good mentors can be distinguished from inefficient ones by different leadership behaviors or styles they display. Yet as few researches has focused on relationships between mentor leadership styles and mentoring functions, researchers are encouraged to expand our understanding of this issue.

Accordingly, with a qualitative research design, the purpose of this study is to explore mentoring styles and behaviors by identifying the leadership behaviors that mentors use to be more effective in their mentoring roles in Chinese education context.

Literature Review

Basic Concepts of Mentoring

Mentoring has been defined in many multi-dimensional ways. In education, it can be defined as
an intentional, instructive and supportive activity by a more experienced teacher that helps shape the growth and development of a less experienced teacher [6]. Through this process, less experienced teachers are facilitated to acquire the wide experiences and knowledge of their mentors [7]. But it is definitely distinctive from cloning since it means more than mentees’ mimicking of mentors’ teaching performance. Instead, it encourages creative and reflective minds, which thus enables educational innovations and reforms [8].

To achieve all the potential benefits of mentoring, we should be cognizant of the need for mentors to find and employ effective strategies in the mentoring process. For them, one of the important aspects of mentoring is whether they can “manage” their mentees. The leadership styles and behaviors adopted by them may impact their effectiveness.

**Leadership Behaviors and Styles**

Leaders can greatly impact their followers’ ability to attain their objectives [9]. To explore the various impacts the different leader behaviors may lead to, House and Mitchell put forward a path-goal model, in which four different types of leader behavior are depicted:

1) Directive leadership: the leader tells subordinates the exact goal and provides specific guidance to achieve the goal.

2) Supportive leadership: the leader creates a friendly and supportive work environment where subordinates are treated as equals.

3) Participative leadership: the leader consults with subordinates and takes their ideas into consideration in making decisions.

4) Achievement-oriented leadership: the leader sets challenging goals for subordinates and shows faith in the subordinates’ capacity to succeed.

These researchers subsequently suggested that leaders may exhibit different behaviors with different subordinates and in different situations. There may be occasions where a leader may use a blend of different behaviors [10].

In order to explore the current mentoring patterns in Chinese education context, the present study focuses on the following research question: What are the styles and behaviors displayed by today’s teacher mentors in China?

**Method**

A qualitative research methodology—the collective case study—was used to gain a better understanding of teacher mentors’ leadership behaviors in China. The target population was teacher mentors in China. Since the population of the study is extremely large, homogeneous sampling strategy was employed in recruiting participants. At the outset, one of the schools in Shanghai—the “XT” College was chosen as the site for study (this pseudonym has been adopted to protect the identity of the institution). The teachers there who had mentoring experience for more than 10 years (five females and two males) were thus invited to participate in the study (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentors’ name (anonymous)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BF</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMF</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WF</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Colleg/University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XW</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YAY</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Colleg/University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participant Demographics.
Ten open-ended interview questions developed by the researcher were employed as the instrument in this study, which focused on mentors’ interpretations of the goals of mentoring, their roles as teacher mentors, practices in the mentoring process, perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring and challenges they are facing in the mentoring process.

Permissions were obtained from the school site as well as each individual participant before collecting data. The seven teacher mentors were thus interviewed on their mentoring. Face to face interviews occurred in the school and ranged in length from 30 to 40 minutes. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to facilitate subsequent data analysis.

**Findings**

After an in-depth analysis of the data gained from the interview, several themes emerge:

**Nonauthoritarian Directive Leadership Behavior in the Mentoring Process**

Mentors can take different leadership behaviors and styles to support mentees in achieving their goals [10]. Basically, these mentors exhibit similar leadership behaviors while interacting with their mentees—the nonauthoritarian directive leadership behavior. By using this kind of path-goal clarifying behavior, mentors provide psychological structure for mentees on a consulting and encouraging basis. They, conceiving themselves as the cooperator of mentees, set the exact performance goals for them, clarify the path to achieve these goals, provide guidance to clear up the barriers they may encounter, finally assess their performance and offer in-time feedback.

1. **Setting the performance goals for mentees**
   To get the mentees ready for their teaching tasks, the mentors generally clarify enhancing teaching skills as the primary goal for the mentees and always intend to help the new teachers adapt themselves to the teaching context. As one mentor said:
   
   “In my practice, I would care more about my mentees’ preparation before class; their manner in class; and their ability in managing the class. These are essential for them to become good teachers. I always make this clear to my mentees at the very beginning.”

   They also expect to “serve as role models” from whom mentees can learn the wide “teaching experiences”. Correspondingly, the inexperienced new teachers are made clearer about what they are expected to learn. They are shown the exact role they should play in classroom and the extrinsic reward or punishment they may get due to their own performance (job security).

2. **Scaffolding mentees to achieve the goals**
   Compared with the traditional mentor-dependent authoritarian mentoring, the mentors interviewed are more mentee-centered and act as facilitators rather than dominators or controllers. They consider the mentor-mentee relationship as a collaborative partnership, in which they are partners to the mentees rather than authorities. As one mentor stated:

   “We [the mentees and I] talk or exchange ideas about teaching frankly and sincerely. I never regard myself as an instructor. If my mentees turned to me with problems or difficulties, I always did my best to help them. I think my role and responsibility as a mentor is to give advice and help to these young mentees who have just become teachers. We get along well.”

3. **Assessing and evaluating mentees’ performance**
   Though these mentors are assigned to assess and evaluate the mentees’ progress in teaching practice, which simply involves the upward communication with the administrators in the university, they interpret their mentoring roles more than that and try their best to support their mentees by providing “face-to-face feedback” and “helping the mentees summarize their strong points and drawbacks in teaching practice”. Such kind of open communication not only “helps eliminate any potential misunderstanding or tension” between mentor and mentees, but also “informs mentees on how to improve teaching skills” and “greatly motivate them [mentees] to make continual efforts in their teaching practices”.

**Limited Benefits for Mentors**

Previous research has revealed that mentoring can bring benefits to all the parties involved — the
mentee, mentor, and the organization [11]. The non-authoritarian directive leadership behavior exhibited by the mentors enhances not only mentees’ professional skills, their motivation to be a successful teacher, but also the work unit performance.

Nevertheless, as far as the mentors in this interview are concerned, there are limited benefits they can derive from the mentoring process. The psychological satisfaction is actually the only benefit they gain from mentoring. Surely it is limited in its power to motivate mentors to fully engage in the mentoring. No wonder they conceive mentoring as “a minor part of job” assigned by administrators. In the following quotes, the mentors note the benefits that they derive from their mentoring:

Mentor #1: “Mentoring is simply a minor part of my job. I didn’t receive any training at all. And there is no extra pay for it. However, I always try to do it well. I think the mutual respect might be the best thing about my collaboration with the mentees.”

Mentor #2: “I am proud of my mentees. All of them impressed me with their ability, sincerity, and modesty. I derive great satisfaction through seeing them succeed. I gained a sense of accomplishment when I saw my mentees became qualified and successful teachers.”

Discussion

These mentors who show mentees the way to success and help them along the path are undoubtedly “leading” their mentees. They have a strong impact on new teachers’ teaching. However, research reveals that such an impact can be context related [12]. The success of mentoring is greatly influenced by some contextual factors as well.

Lack of Contextual Support for Mentoring

It is revealed from previous study that mentoring is more likely to be successful where mentors receive financial reward or some other form of recognition for their work [13]. It is suggested in this study that driven by pure psychological satisfaction only is not motivational enough to fully engage mentors in the mentoring process. Without any financial reward or additional release, the mentors conceive mentoring as a minor part of job assigned by administrators and are not motivated enough to fully engage in their mentoring. Therefore, to facilitate effective mentoring, schools should provide continued support for mentors as they complete their work as mentors. This includes providing appropriate financial reward, reducing mentors’ workload, and consolidating their professional status, etc.

Pretermission of Mentoring Preparation

Mentors tend to be more effective when they have received an appropriate program of mentor preparation [14]. The most obvious evidence shown in this study is that if mentors don’t receive any kind of training on mentoring, it’s hard for them to develop a manifold and comprehensive set of performance goals for the mentees. One of the mentor interviewed frankly responded to the question by saying that “I don’t quite understand what the goals of mentoring are”. Others simplify mentoring as coaching new teachers and put their focus only on the teaching skills, i.e. the professional development of the new teachers. However, though it is undoubtedly significant, we cannot put all emphasis on it. Mentoring preparation programs are thus indispensable to make mentors aware of the critical goals to achieve, like providing various emotional supports for mentees, promoting their socialization, and so on.

Conclusion

Mentoring, though cannot be seen as a panacea to solve every problem in teacher education, plays a significant role in the induction of new teachers into the profession. To ensure an effective mentoring, mentors, as the critical part of mentoring, can exhibit different leadership behaviors and styles to “manage” their mentees.

However, we need to be aware that the variation in their styles and behaviors is vastly influenced by many situational factors, such as the ways how they are prepared for mentoring, the workload...
they have to cope with, public recognition, and so forth. Therefore, in China, mentors are in dire need of support from schools and educational systems. Schools and educational systems should take more responsibility in the initial preparation of mentoring and provide continued financial/emotional support for mentors. Undoubtedly, this will exert notable impacts on mentors’ leadership styles and behaviors by re-conceptualizing mentoring as a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship.

Limitations of this study include the fact that the sample is not fully representative of the teacher mentors in Shanghai, much less than those of China. Moreover, the fact that the data were based on their self-report also lead to limited generalizability. In order to understand this topic better, further study will be encouraged to do with more robust observation data.

References