

reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION ISSUE 8 2018



THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT OF LEADERSHIP – MENTORING AND COACHING

Jodie Hayes, Centre Manager, Acton Education and Care Service, Lady Gowrie Tasmania

This Reflections Issue is a reflective piece by an educator in a centre leader position, exploring the importance of mentoring and coaching for new educators into the sector.

*"No more than four bottom washers together"...*this is one of the earliest memories I have from when I commenced my early childhood career, just over twenty years ago. The educator who gave me the laundry advice, went on to become one of several women who have positively influenced my career and played a pivotal part in where I am today.

Aside from the laundry lesson, I learnt about engagement with families, the fundamentals of observation, a strong work ethic and most importantly how to maintain a sense of fun with children and colleagues.

The Centre Director during this time also provided guidance and support. She was approachable and offered encouragement to succeed whilst pursuing my qualification. I remember her saying, *"...always answer the phone with a smile"*. To this day, I maintain a strong work ethic, a sense of fun with children and colleagues and a great desire to encourage others to succeed.

THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT OF LEADERSHIP – MENTORING AND COACHING (CONTINUED)

Twenty years ago, the term 'mentor' was foreign to me as it was not used often. Today it's a key term in early childhood language. I think about the role of a coach and mentor and wonder if educators starting out in their early childhood career today, see the value and importance of having these guiding influences in their professional lives. Who will they reflect back on and say, *"They helped shape me into the educator and leader I am today"*.

The early childhood education and care workforce is more transient, with staff turnover and skill shortages at a high level. This impacts broadly on children, families and educators. Are there experienced educators with the skills and knowledge to mentor and coach new entrants into the profession? How does mentoring happen in a diverse range of early childhood settings? Is there time and space for this to occur?

Within my workplace, I am one of two Managers who spend two days working in a team, implementing programs for children whilst providing role modeling and coaching for educators. The remaining two and a half days provide opportunities for mentoring the whole educator team whilst managing the day to day operations. I truly feel the benefit of this model in terms of coaching and mentoring and I have had the pleasure in supporting a number of educators to succeed in gaining their qualification and take on leadership roles.

By working alongside educators, engaging in constructive conversations, using reflection and providing hands on examples of good pedagogical practice, I hope that I might become one of those people that they think of when asked, *"...who has influenced your career?"*

All educators should see themselves and each other as valuable learning tools. If I go back to my laundry lesson all those years ago, there was no assumption, by either party, that I knew what to do - there was an opportunity for me to question and revisit for clarity if I needed. The process of coaching and mentoring enables the embedding of best practice. Online training and the

world of internet surfing means if educators want to expand their knowledge or skills, they are often doing it on their own, with only their own interpretation. Where is the questioning? Where is the clarification? Where is the linking of theory to practice?

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, encourages educators to support children to become collaborators, learning from a culture of lively enquiry. In order to successfully strive towards this outcome for children, we need to instill this practice amongst educators.

Mentoring, role modelling and engaging in constructive conversations are skills we need to embrace in the current early childhood sector in order to move forward and strengthen our teams of educators. For leaders like myself, we must think back to the people who guided us and identify what it was that inspired us to keep going.

Leaders need to reflect on how we instill a desire for ongoing learning, sharing information and skills and how we mentor new educators, thus supporting a skilled and qualified professional workforce, equipped to undertake the important role of educating and caring for children. This will benefit children now and in the future.

A personal commitment to support, coach and mentor colleagues, and participate in a lively culture of professional inquiry as identified in the ECA Code of Ethics, is what I believe is required by all educators. Effective educator development can be challenging but it is everyone's responsibility.

References

- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, (2009), *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics (Version 3) February 2016



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