

***Experiences of Outstanding Principals as Mentors:
Policy Inputs to a Viable Mentoring Program in
DepEd – Division of Pasig City***

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the everyday experiences of outstanding principals as mentors cum school leaders, and propose policies for a viable mentoring program in DepEd – Division of Pasig City. In the context of this study, mentoring is a learning and development (L & D) program deliberately designed to prepare aspiring principals for the position to ensure that the next generation of school heads are well-prepared for the demands of the job. Utilizing a case study design, this paper purposively identified five (5) outstanding principals who answered the following questions through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions: (1) How were the participants mentored prior to them becoming school administrators themselves? (2) What mentoring programs have the participants put in place prior to and after they became school administrators? (3) How did the participants deal with the challenges of sustaining the mentoring programs that they initiated? (4) What have been the products of the mentoring programs started and sustained by the participants? (5) What types of mentoring programs may be institutionalized in the Division of Pasig City?, and (6) What policies may be put in place to institutionalize mentoring programs in the Division of Pasig City? Findings from the study revealed that the principals mentored teachers with leadership and management potential through job rotation, job shadowing, immersion, and stretched assignments. The study concludes with policy-related suggestions and practical ways to strengthen and institutionalize a culture of mentoring and continuous improvement in the Division of Pasig City.

Keywords: mentoring program, policy, continuous improvement

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Introduction

Mentoring is usually defined as a formal or informal relationship between a highly experienced mentor and a relatively inexperienced understudy (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2008; Jones, Woods and Guillame, 2015). According to Ilevbare (n.d.), it is

“a developmental relationship between a more experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced partner (the mentee) for purposes of sharing technical information, institutional knowledge and insight with respect to a particular occupation, profession, organization or endeavor (p. 197)”.

It is also thought of as “planned early intervention designed to provide timely instruction to mentees throughout their apprenticeship, to shorten the learning curve, reinforce positive work ethics and attitudes, and provide mentees with role models” (Hipes and Marioni, 2005, p.1).

The concept of mentoring is not something new (Educational Alliance at Brown University and National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2003). In fact, the words ‘mentor’ and ‘mentoring’ stem from the Greek classic “The Odyssey” by Homer (Hiwatig, Faustino, Sumida, Pawilen, Fujita and Kumagai, 2011). It was said that a wise man named Mentor cared for, protected and educated Telemachus, the son of Ulysses (Johnson, 2002; Hipes and Marioni, 2005; Abiddin, 2006). The word ‘mentor’ also signifies a “father figure” who backs up, counsels, trains, and develops a younger person (Erich, Hansford and Erich, 2011). Kram (1985) notes that a mentor “supports, guides, and counsels a young adult as he or she accomplishes mastery of the adult world or the world of work” (p. 2). A mentor also teaches the mentee the “values, customs, resources and personal dynamics found in the organization” (Levinson, 1978 in Al Jenaibi, 2013). He or she is also expected to offer advice, share information, sponsor, and develop his or her mentee (Hipes and Marioni, 2005; Holland, 2009; Ehrich, et al, 2011).

Mentoring also applies to a wide range of people, situations and purposes. It includes a wide-ranging scope of roles and responsibilities such as teaching, sponsoring, counseling, advising, and even challenging; however, the “whole is clearly more than the sum of these parts” (Johnson, 2002). Further, the relationship between a mentor and mentee is usually long-standing. For Ragis and Kram (2007), this bond usually goes through stages, such as initiation (up to 1 year), cultivation (years 2-5), separation (from 6 months to 2 years) and redefinition (where it becomes more peer-like). Under a mentoring relationship, the mentor is expected to be highly proficient and knowledgeable in the discipline or field in which the mentee is merely starting.

In the context of this study, mentoring is a learning and development (L & D) intervention deliberately implemented by principals to adequately groom aspiring and future leaders for the position to ensure that the next generation of school heads are well-prepared for the demands of the job. With the growing call for shared governance, shared leadership, accountability, and transparency, principals nowadays face greater challenges compared to their counterparts in previous years. The Southern Regional Education Board (n.d.) mentions that

“...too many new leaders are left to “learn on the job.” Their first opportunity to plan and implement school improvement actions will be as head of a school — typically without much guidance from successful peers. In an environment of increasing accountability from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, this “sink-or-swim, stumble through it” approach to principal leadership development not only is counterproductive but helps explain why school reform efforts so often sputter and die out (p. 9).”

Recognizing the importance of mentoring in supporting the professional growth and development of school leaders, this paper will show how selected outstanding school principals were themselves mentored, how they later on intentionally designed mentoring programs, what have been the outcomes of these programs, and how these successful stories can be used now as inputs to a viable mentoring program in DepEd Division of Pasig City.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research that utilized the case study design. It sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) How were the participants mentored prior to them becoming school administrators themselves;
- (2) What mentoring programs have the participants put in place prior to and after they became school administrators;
- (3) How did the participants deal with the challenges of sustaining the mentoring programs that they initiated;
- (4) What have been the products of the mentoring programs started and sustained by the participants;
- (5) What types of mentoring programs may be institutionalized in the Division of Pasig City?;
- (6) What policies may be put in place to institutionalize mentoring programs in the Division of Pasig City?

Data Gathering Procedure

Focus group discussion (FGD) and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were the main data gathering methods used for this study. Participants were asked to sign prior consent forms that indicate the following:

- a. Participation in the study is voluntary. The school heads may opt not to join succeeding sessions as the data gathering procedure progresses.
- b. FGD and actual interviews will be tape-recorded to ensure fidelity of data capture.
- c. Participants’ privacy will be safeguarded. Names of the school heads involved in the study, as well as their personal circumstances and other information, will be omitted.

The researchers also utilized document analysis as a data gathering procedure. School performance indicators, school report cards, accomplishment reports, and other documents (ie, school learning action cells) and proofs of outstanding accomplishments were analyzed to examine the mentoring programs of the schools.

Findings from these reports were organized, categorized, and quoted to form a coherent narrative in answer to the research questions. Significant statements were quoted verbatim in appropriate sections of this paper.

Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify and choose the school heads who participated in the study. To obtain relevant and broadly-encompassing perspectives on mentoring programs, the following criteria were used in choosing the participating principals:

- a. The participant should have been a full-pledged principal for at least 5 years.
- b. He/she must have been in the public school system for an aggregate of at least 10 years.
- c. He/she must have been or must currently be principal of a performing school, and must be known to have initiated innovations and continuous improvements programs and projects that resulted to better performance indicators for the institution.
- d. He/she must be well-respected among his/her peers in his/her respective organization (ie, PACESPA for principals of elementary schools and ASSAP for principals of secondary schools).
- e. He/she must be known and acknowledged for mentoring at least one (1) highly successful teacher-leader, fellow principal or Division office employee.

Of the criteria listed above, six (6) principals were shortlisted for this study. They were chosen not only for meeting the abovementioned descriptions, but also for their willingness to be involved in the research. However, due to time constraints, only five (5) actually participated. Three (3) of the principals were secondary school heads, while two (2) were elementary school leaders. Two (2) were male and the three (3) were female. Only one (1) participant was in his mid-forties, one (1) was in her early fifties, while three (3) were already near the retirement age of sixty-five. All of them have been with DepEd for a minimum of twenty (20) years in service, three (3) of whom have served the Department beyond thirty-five (35) years.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data from the focus group discussions and interviews were analyzed qualitatively. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Recurrent themes or patterns were identified. These include ideas, concepts, and terminologies or phrases that kept repeating or iterating. These were further organized into coherent categories.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are reported qualitatively. The results are clustered and reported based on the research questions of this study.

(1) How were the participants mentored prior to them becoming school administrators themselves?

All five of the participants started out as classroom teachers in the public school system. Unanimously, they all shared that “their former school heads saw and

recognized their potential, and helped jumpstart their careers”. When their principals saw that they had leadership potential, they immediately provided or opened up opportunities for these administrators-in-training to learn firsthand, and to have actual field experience. Of this, they said:

Principal (P) 1: My former principal believed in my capabilities to become a school head; since then, she has assigned me to work in her office and I became her Assistant Principal. Everyday, we would talk about my work and how I handle daily issues and concerns. If there were problems, we would both sit down and discuss them but she lets me find the solutions to them. She really focused on me and made sure to mentor me. She made me feel how much she trusts my judgment, so I also did my best not to disappoint her. We were together for four years, and in all those years, she supported, guided, coached, mentored, and led me. When she finally felt that I was ready to take on greater responsibilities, she recommended me to become an Officer-in-Charge until I was eventually promoted as Principal I.

We may differ in the way we approach problems and issues, but what I really appreciate about her is that she never dictated to me what to do. She let me make an respected my own decisions. She let me learn from my experiences. She gave me opportunities to learn about this type of work by myself, with her, and with other fellow principals since according to her, one day I will just be left on my own and with them [fellow principals].

P 2: At first, she [the principal] would just ask me to help out in the office. However, later on it became an official arrangement. This time, I was no longer on an on-call or per project basis. I became a full-pledged Assistant Principal [with designation papers]. Ma’am taught me the work of a school head because she said, “One day, I will no longer be around and you’ll be left behind to do the work of a principal. You have to know everything, and I know you can do it”.

Little by little, Ma’am trained me systematically. At first, it seemed that she gave me only the so-called ‘easy cases’. But later on, she entrusted to me the more complex ones. She calibrated every single task she assigned to me. Ma’am also ensured I know every aspect of school operations by making me go through job rotation where I learned the ropes. Indeed, I went through everything by experience.

P 3: I was the right-hand man of Ma’am for a long time. She is really a very good teacher who patiently taught me everything I know about being a principal, from dealing with the parents, to making decisions, to handling responsibilities, to taking

good care of partners like the local government. Ma'am taught me all that I know about being a school head. She always brought me along to every major activity, introduced me to her networks, and made sure all people and all transactions passed through me first so that I know what is happening and I could help her make decisions. I was like her shadow, and I screened everything for her. She intentionally designed that kind of arrangement so that I would grow and learn through firsthand experience and exposure.

P 4: I'm very lucky that Ma'am became my principal because she never withheld any vital information from me. She taught and passed on all that I needed to know about how to become a school head. She patiently supported and guided me until I was able to predict how she herself would think and react on each problem or situation. But she also let me exercise my creativity. She did not stifle my own decision-making. She just made sure I had a good foundation and that I was really capacitated [to become a school head] so that I wouldn't be starting from scratch. Then she let me implement my own ideas. She always made her presence felt and made sure I had a wonderful training under her guidance.

P 5: Ma'am let me go through the toughest training because for her, I needed to experience the difficult times now so that when the real tests of school leadership come, I would know what to do. I think I went through everything a trainee needs to do through. She gave me a chance to lead, to solve problems major concerns, to make big decisions, all by myself but with her constant guidance. She never left me on my own nor allowed me to be in uncertain situations. At first, she was really very strict with me but later when I earned her trust and confidence, I also felt her "relax" towards me. She made sure she prepared me well before she let me go.

P 6: Before, every school head would look for an understudy. Every principal would try to look for a teacher who can potentially lead a school later on. So if one has the potential, the principal would really train and mentor that teacher. That is exactly what my principal did to me. I was almost like a shadow to her because I was with her wherever she went so that I would see what and how she was doing things as she ran the school. When there were decisions to make, she would patiently ask me what I thought was best for the situations even if I knew she already had an answer in mind. I knew she purposely exposed me to her line of work and gave me opportunities to learn firsthand from her so that I would learn what principals do and how they deal with the consequences of their decisions.

Mentoring, in the context of the respondents' answers, was to go through what Harvard Business Review (2017) calls as *job rotation*, or being introduced to different facets of operation in the organization; *job shadowing*, or being given guidance one needs to perform the role well; and *stretched assignment*, or exploring the untapped potentials of trainees through challenging tasks. This was very evident when the predecessors of the participants made them go through different roles in the organization, provided technical assistance to empower them in their tasks, and unleashed their otherwise unknown capabilities. The position of a school head requires many competencies that cannot just be learned by reading books; they have to be *lived experiences* of going through the actual job by being an understudy or mentee of a real principal, having the right exposure to circumstances that will bring out those competencies (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d.), and acquiring wisdom by "moving in the circles of the practitioners themselves" (Johnson, 2018). These are all consistent with the current array of learning and development programs of the Department (De Sagun, 2018).

(2) What mentoring programs have the participants put in place prior to and after they became school administrators?

Four out of the five principals were Master Teachers themselves before they became school heads; one was a Teacher but held the post of Assistant to the Principal; thus, they were familiar with what it meant to mentor people before they became school heads.

The principals understood the concept of passing on *what they know* and *what they have experienced* to their teachers who were also potential leaders; hence, their common answers were making them go through the same things as they experienced before. These include being given stretch assignments, doing one-on-one mentoring, leading learning action cells (LAC) and teachers' quality circles (TQC), and sharing what they know through demonstration teaching and echo training of seminars attended.

P 4: Every Friday, we would always meet and share what we know about our field of specialization so that these experiences would be useful to our colleagues. We also always had trainings, and whoever was sent to these events were required to do an echo training back in the school. I continued to do all of those things in my school when I became a principal. I experienced many things with my former principal which I now pass on to my teachers so that I can also prepare them. I also make sure to give them challenging tasks and make them do things they have never tried before to further develop their competences. I make it a conscious effort on my effort to always give them challenges that will provide them a different perspective...

P 2: ...I ask teachers to share what they know and use the opportunity to impart what they have learned to others. Whenever my teachers are sent to trainings, they have to

conduct the same in our school and district. When I became a school head, I intensified our LAC sessions, demonstration teaching and continuous improvement projects. I did my best to train my teachers even in areas that are not their strengths to spur their professional growth and development since one day they will become school heads themselves.

P 5: What I experienced from Ma'am, I also did to my own fellow teachers. I gave them a variety of assignments and responsibilities so that they would see the different facets of being a principal's work life. I sent them to trainings, made them share their own personal learnings and application from the trainings, supported their demonstration teaching and research, and gave the committee work so that they know how to mobilize people because they will be doing the same things I was doing someday.

P 3: I had LAC, continuous improvement, research work, committee assignment, and job rotation. I insisted that they do not remain in one position or assignment; they had to know all the aspects of a principal's work.

(Mentoring) before and now are the same. Only that, I give my Master Teachers more intense training and preparation compared to my Regular Teachers.

It is worth noting that all of the principals themselves shared that they had to be creative and insistent in mentoring their teachers, and in maintaining a culture of mentoring in their schools. As one school head shared, "Some teachers are resistant to change. But this [mentoring program] is important. They need to know that we are serious in implementing this program and that this needs to be done and sustained." (**P 4**). Consistently, they all said that though the mentoring strategies and techniques they used were the same ones that they went through, they had to "be creative on how we will implement them, when we will implement them, and with what combination of mentoring program will we implement them" (**P 3**). This array of strategies includes coaching and mentoring on a daily basis, structuring opportunities for mentees to solve problems, asking mentees to observe, then later on lead teams in solving problems and in implementing school-wide programs and projects. Also, they all said that this meant being participatory in their approach to school leadership and management, and asking the mentees to take part in planning and decision-making.

(3) How did the participants deal with the challenges of sustaining the mentoring programs that they initiated?

Sometimes, the difficulty itself of the job of being a principal becomes the very factor why people do not want to be mentored and trained. Some teachers would rather remain as teachers, and not go up the hierarchical structure (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d.). This is what the principals intimated to the researcher during the interviews. On the other hand, when one has already trained and promoted people,

the challenge is to also look for new ones to recruit and train; that is, if they are also willing and have the capabilities necessary for the position. In the words of all the principals interviewed, sustaining the program also means finding “creative ways to push through with it even if the schedule is very tight, and even if we have so many priorities coming our way”. As one principal said, it also means “using our executive power as school heads to insist that this program be done because otherwise they will not do it if they see that we are not serious with it” (P 3). For all of the respondents, this means embedding mentoring in the job, and requiring the mentees to be there for mentoring sessions either on lunch breaks, or after work. The principals also unanimously shared that they needed to be creative and have a strong will to implement a good program like this, or else they will not be able to positively impact the teachers and effectively run their schools.

In addition, data revealed that all of the principals regularly tapped mentees, and all of them also strengthened the LAC as a means to mentor teachers through their colleagues. All five of them also put in place various types of incentives and rewards system for mentees who have successfully completed their tasks, and four out of the five principals introduced succession planning so that the potential leaders in the organization have a clear career pathway. One is already on his way to crafting the succession plan, but also generally agrees that there has to be a “systematic way of developing people in the organization, and this plan should be known to all” (P 4).

Interestingly, only two participants institutionalized LAC by earmarking a budget for these learning sessions by including them in the Annual and School Improvement Plans (AIP / SIP).

P 2: I included in our AIP/SIP the LAC sessions so that my teachers are assured that there is budget for snacks every time they conduct the LAC.

P 5: The LAC was made part of our school’s AIP/SIP so that teachers would be more encouraged to share what they know and what they learned to their fellow teachers.

(4) What have been the products of the mentoring programs started and sustained by the participants?

Five out of the five principals have produced Master Teachers, Head Teachers or Department Heads, while four out of five already produced principals. The one who has not yet produced a principal inspired his teachers to go through researches and continuous improvement projects; his school was recently awarded as the most productive in terms of number of researches produced. Three out of the five were able to produce Division Education Program Specialists and Supervisors. All five of the principals were the publicly acknowledged inspirations and driving forces by their teachers who received various recognitions given by DepEd.

It is worth noting that all of the respondents mentioned that from the time they mentored these teacher-leaders until now, they have not stopped communicating and meeting regularly. They continue to provide mentoring to these teacher-leaders, albeit on a per need basis, and not so frequent as before when they were being

immersed in their current work. Mentoring, according to all of the participants, is “a wonderful lifestyle that should be cultivated among teachers and leaders”.

(5) What types of mentoring programs may be institutionalized in the Division of Pasig City?

The Department of Education has already introduced a Teacher Induction Program (TIP) for newly-hired teachers and teachers with 0-3 years of teaching experience. Hence, the school heads simply suggested that these be “further institutionalized by making TIP a Division-led activity before it becomes a school-based initiative”.

All of the participants also suggested that since there is an induction program for teachers, so should newly-promoted Master Teachers, Head Teachers, Assistant Principals, Principals, and even Supervisors. As two of the principals said,

P 1: To make the transition from being a teacher to being a leader in the school is difficult. There is a need to prepare people to do their job well *before* they get appointed to that (principal) position.

To this, another remarked:

P 4: It is extremely important to completely prepare a person for work --- mind, heart, and hands. This is why if we have an induction program for teachers, we should also have an induction program for Master Teachers, Head Teachers, Principals, and Supervisors, especially since they have greater responsibilities. Mentoring should be a must for everybody in the school.

All five of the participants were in agreement that there is a need to also intentionally teach people how to do mentoring and coaching. Since they all had a very positive experience being mentored and coached by their former principals, they also strongly push for the same type of experience to be a “permanent program for training future principals and leaders” (**P 4**).

Finally, the principals also mentioned that since teachers have been very active in LAC sessions, principals themselves can also adapt this learning modality. Hence, in the discussions and interviews, the participants suggested the idea of mentoring a fellow school head through “Division-wide learning action cell (LAC) sessions or Principals’ Quality Circle (PQC) sessions” (**P 1**).

It should be noted that at the time when data was being gathered for this study, unknown to the participants, the Division Office was already preparing for the very first PQC as well as the very first principals’ induction program specially designed for the newly-appointed Assistant Principals and Principals.

(6) What policies may be put in place to institutionalize mentoring programs in the Division of Pasig City?

To institutionalize mentoring in the Division, the school heads unanimously suggested that the Division office should take the lead in organizing mentoring-related activities and in providing technical assistance to the field to make sure that the activities put in place are being implemented. The principals noted that:

It is so much different if it is the Division Office initiating mentoring and mentoring-related activities. The Division should lay down guidelines how to go about (mentoring) it so that it is clear. We have many newcomers for school heads. They need our technical assistance and guidance. **(P 3)**

The Division and the school heads can collaborate to set up a mentoring system in Pasig. We can start by mentoring fellow principals, especially those who are still newly appointed. **(P 1)**

I am excited about the ways we can think of on how to share and disseminate our best practices on mentoring. There is so much to learn from fellow school heads. **(P 5)**

Conclusion and Recommendations

There were three recurrent themes that emerged from this study. They are: willpower and motivation of the principals to effect positive changes, creativity and innovativeness of the school heads in using tried and tested mentoring techniques and strategies, and collaboration and cooperation of the school heads and teachers to sustain the gains of their mentoring programs.

The success of the schools critically begins with the school heads who have been sufficiently prepared for the job through well-thought of mentoring programs that engage them in actual leadership and management experiences where they are challenged to thrive and perform (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d.). To this end, the Division Office of Pasig City must provide the technical assistance required to help set-up a formal mentoring program starting with the principals themselves, but also provide technical assistance to support newly-appointed principals as they also mentor their own teachers.

The Division office must revisit its strategic education plans to include mentoring as one of its strategic directions. It must also fine tune its L & D system by involving school heads in its continuous improvement to ensure that their inputs are considered when designing mentoring programs for the Division and for the schools. It must also take the lead in orienting and training new school heads on how to conduct mentoring and coaching to their own teachers.

To further strengthen a culture of sharing knowledge and best practices, the Division office may also opt to make L & D interventions as output / outcomes-based. This means requiring all employees sent to trainings and seminars to have conduct workplace application projects, or projects that directly apply what they have learned from the training they have been sent to.

The researcher recommends that further studies on the impact and outcome of mentoring programs for school heads be further explored. Also, another study on the specific competencies and skills of great principals who have mentored others should be further investigated. Not all great principals turn out to become great mentors. It is one thing to perform the job; it is another to teach and pass it on to someone.

No successful school leader made it on his own. Mentoring must be deliberately included as part of the duties of principals so that they can contribute to ensuring that the next wave of school leaders have been thoroughly prepared for the job.

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