

Chapter 8

Mentoring Graduate Students in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will describe high-quality doctoral mentorship in early childhood education. Given the growing numbers of young children attending inclusive early childhood programs prior to school entry in the U.S., it is imperative that there are well-trained personnel to fill faculty and leadership positions in the early childhood field. The chapter will define mentorship in early childhood education, describe key doctoral mentorship models, elucidate components of high-quality mentorship, and discuss challenges that early childhood education mentors and mentees face. The authors present a case study of an early childhood doctoral training program that utilized key components of early childhood doctoral mentorship, concluding with suggestions for how to best support ECE faculty and doctoral students going forward.

INTRODUCTION

“From a small seed a mighty trunk may grow,” ~Aeschylus

The epigraph from Aeschylus serves as a motif for discussing the process and importance of doctoral mentorship in early childhood education (ECE). A mentor is like a gardener who helps to nurture a doctoral student to become future faculty member or educational leader. Mentorship, the individual relationship between a student and a faculty member, is cornerstone of a successful and positive doctoral experience in education. For early childhood doctoral students, mentorship is key in preparing future early childhood faculty members, researchers, and leaders. Given state-funded preschool initiatives in U.S. and increased numbers of young children utilizing early childhood special education (ECSE) services, there is a critical need for well-trained early childhood faculty members and leadership personnel (Robb et al., 2012).

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There have been many federally funded interdisciplinary doctoral programs in early childhood education and early childhood special education (Woods et al., 2009). However, there are no known studies or conceptual papers published about the processes and practices involved in doctoral mentorship in ECE. This chapter seeks to contribute to the literature base by identifying and describing key components of doctoral mentorship in ECE. We will define doctoral mentorship, challenges in ECE doctoral mentorship, models of mentorship that could be used in ECE doctoral programs, and key components of effective doctoral mentorship in ECE.

Defining Mentorship

At the root of a professional life lies the relationships that shape one's career. Having a strong and supportive mentor is linked to doctoral program completion and positive professional and emotional development (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008). While there is considerable research on the importance of a mentor, there are various definitions of a mentor and their important characteristics. Is there a person who comes to your mind when you think of a mentor(s) in your life? How do you know they are a mentor? What is a mentor? In Word software, when the synonym option is selected, the following words are shown to mean similar or same as "mentor": *advisor, counselor, guru, teacher, and tutor*. First, we will start by defining what a mentor is NOT and then we will share our definition of what a mentor is.

What Mentorship is Not

A mentor is **NOT** a *coach, advocate, or buddy*. A **coach** is a person who assists someone learn something, and/or develop a skill (Fullan, & Knight, 2011; Hooker, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017). In ECE the skills a coach can support range from "how to develop a grant proposal for funding," to "how to establish useful policies for children and families at the state or national level," or "how to gain access to resources for children with disabilities." Peer coaching is a trend that has gained popularity since the 1980s with evidence supporting professionals in ECE (Hooker, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017). Coaching tends to have a short-term relationship model with beginning and end dates. Coaching is not the same as mentoring.

A **buddy** is a person who can provide assistance (Chumbimuni Torres, et al., 2020). For example, a buddy can help the ECE professional with using the copy machine to make handouts, or let you use their template to create a resume/CV. A buddy may not have the level of expertise, experience, wisdom, and/or insight needed to support professional development with career advancement as the aim. The buddy relationship could be either short- or long-term. In ECE, the buddy might be a peer who can help with a range of activities from "someone to talk with who listens," to "helping learn who to go to for help with a problem," and "someone to participate in a professional conference with who is interested in common topics." Buddying, or friending, is not the same as mentoring.

An **advocate** is a person who encourages someone and their career. The advocate could promote someone by providing opportunities they likely would not have available without the advocacy. For example, a department chair could advocate for a person by throwing their name in to receive some type of professional benefit or award. In ECE, the advocate might be a someone who can promote someone's work to others ranging from, "putting in a good word to stakeholders who can influence career advancement," to "advocacy related to providing support for someone when there is a conflict." Advocacy in ECE can be a short-term relationship, or it can take place over time. Advocating is not the same as mentoring.

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