MENTOR MINUTE

Individualizing mentor support for teachers

James Rowley (1999) states that meaningful learning takes place in the context of a significant relationship. Jablon, Dombro and Johnsen concur in their book, *Coaching with Powerful Interactions,* that individualized mentor support to teachers begins with finding the "just right fit;" being mindful of each teacher's needs, personalities, backgrounds and cultures, and interests. Effective mentor support begins first with building relationships with their teachers. Time spent by mentors in learning the interests, dreams and needs of their teachers demonstrates respect and is crucial in developing the mentor-mentee relationship. Individualizing support for teachers provides modeling opportunities that encourage teachers to individualize support for the children they teach (2016).

Building relationships

A supportive and responsive professional relationship is needed to begin the mentoring process (Chu, 2012). Trust is more likely to be built when mentors establish the relationship by listening and asking open-ended questions to learn about the teacher: common interests they may share and what the teacher wants to know and be able to do. An important component in developing relationships is to **"accept another person without making judgments"**; to see beginning teachers as a developing person and professional who needs meaningful support.

Getting to know our teachers

Miller and Rollnick (2002) state that teachers who feel frustrated or anxious about making changes become more comfortable when their concerns are first met with acceptance and empathy. Chu proposes that mentors who offer quick fixes before they begin to develop relationships, usually do not prompt long-term change in teacher behaviors. Mentors need first to listen to teachers, promoting teachers' strengths as the basis for building their work with teachers. Furthermore, Whitebrook and Bellm (2014), state that mentors support teachers in a "finely-tuned balance of support and challenge, focused on encouraging reflection, change and growth" in the teacher. Jablon, Dombro and Johnsen share, "I imagine myself to be a yellow highlighter in the teacher's classroom, highlighting what she is doing effectively so that she can do it over and over again."

Strategies for Individualizing Mentor Support

- Plan time with teachers in the classroom to see their classroom practice
- Schedule time with teachers at a time they can talk (nap-time/after school) to encourage reflective conversations
- Send targeted emails (with appropriate amount of information – not too much or too little)
- Use teachers' interests to guide how we support them
- Support teachers in identifying their strengths to share with others in a PLC
- Promote collaborative partnerships (site administrator, TA, etc.) to build on teachers' strengths
- Align mentor support to teacher's understanding and level of teaching practice
- Mentors own continued self-assessment and reflection of their knowledge and skills to best meet the needs of their teachers
- Use photos selectively to highlight teacher effectiveness and promote teacher reflection on next steps
- Acknowledge and celebrate teachers' progress with them
- Refer to Early Educator Support Office Mentor Continuum for guidance to individualize mentor support for teachers in different tasks (classroom support, PDP development, understanding and using Foundations, etc.)
- Identify and support teachers' learning styles
- Continue to weave educational language and content into conversations with teachers to build their knowledge base
- Intentionally connect on-going conversations with teachers to NC Foundations and rubric
- Review notes before next meeting/contact with teacher, touching base on progress as a result of prior conversation
- Embed PDP goals and progress into on-going conversations

Useful and Relevant Resources

Katzenmeyer, M. & Moller, G. (2009). *Awaking the sleeping giant: Helping Teacher to develop Leadership.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin (create link)

Early Educator Support Office– Mentor Continuum
(add link)

* What motivated you to become an Early Childhood Educator?
* Tell me more about your interests/hobbies that you may have (questionnaire/conversation)
* What can you tell me about the children in your class this year?
* What you are most proud of this year? (Focus on teachers' strengths)
* What have been some of your challenges this year? What strategies have you used to overcome the challenges?
* Use "I noticed statements" to begin follow-up conversation
* What are you noticing in your classroom and teaching practice since my last visit?
* Why do you think so?
* What outcomes are you seeing as a result of your PDP goals?
* How might this connect back to NC Foundations?
* What are some ways that you can promote and capture children's thoughts about their learning? Why do you think this is important?
* What is the best way for me to follow up with you?

Photo 1:

What conversations might the mentor have with the teacher to enhance this area or make it more inviting and supportive to children's emotional social development?

Photo 2:

How could a mentor support the teacher in utilizing the blank space on the shelf? What are some possibilities for this space?

Photo 3:

Children were drawing pictures after the teacher read the book, *Ten Apples on Top.* How could the teacher capture what this child remembers about the book or is reflected in her picture? How might you provide more opportunities for children that are ready to engage in writing?

Photo 4:

Children were playing with dolls, a doctor kit and filling bags with food during center time. How could the teacher intentionally set up the dramatic play area to support children's play and expand their knowledge of healthy food and nutrition (lesson for the week)?

Special thanks to Starr Batts, this month's guest contributor!

REFERENCES

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