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## **Improve Mentorship Through Meaningful Feedback and Coaching**

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**Improve Mentorship Through Meaningful Feedback and Coaching**

Molly Montavon

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

### **Abstract**

Mentoring within a school setting has been formalized and researched; however, there is minimal research surrounding mentoring in early childhood education settings. Students attending a community college for early childhood education are sent to centers that do not offer mentoring training to support the students through their education journey. This results in the students having inconsistent experiences that could lead to them exiting the program and field. The lack of formalized mentor training catalyzes this school improvement plan for a local community college. The mentors have experience and education while presenting best practices within early childhood education. This plan will formalize the mentorship within the community college lab school, focusing on supporting the students through effective and meaningful feedback and coaching.

*Keywords:* Early Childhood Education, Mentoring, Community College Lab School, Early Childhood Education students

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## **Improve Mentorship Through Meaningful Feedback and Coaching**

### **Introduction**

Mentorship in education is crucial for the growth and development of new teachers: "Mentoring and mentored learning are integral aspects of learning to teach in practice" (Ben-Harush, A. & Orland-Barak, L., 2019, p. 183). Colleges and universities utilize mentorships for practicums and student teaching in their education programs. Mentorship in early childhood education students completing their field experiences within a childcare setting is less formal than students completing their student teaching within a school district. For this paper, the student refers to the person attending an early childhood education college program completing their field experience and internship, and the mentor is the child development specialist supporting the student. The problem is that mentors in childcare settings need to be trained on how to be effective mentors, and when they are appropriately trained, it can positively impact the students' growth and development.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to improve the mentorship program at a local Community College Child Development Center (CC CDC) for the students completing lab courses in early childhood education. The mentorship for students enrolled in field experience and internship is completed within one semester and offered during the fall, spring, and summer semesters. The students are in the onsite classroom for an average of one day a week for 10 hours. The lab instructor provides structured feedback forms, observations, and planned teaching; however, there are no set meeting times, nor do the mentors have access to student's reflections or submitted work for the course. Meetings between the mentor and student are at the mentor's discretion, time, and availability of the student. The Child Development Specialists receive in-the-moment training to mentor students at different levels, including personal

interpretation of feedback forms and observations. The school improvement plan will create a cohesive orientation on mentoring students in the early childhood education program, which will clarify the role of the mentor, expectations on providing feedback, and an overall understanding of the courses and students present within the lab school. The orientation will strengthen CC CDC's mentor program and ensure the students completing their lab work receive the feedback and support necessary to succeed in early childhood settings.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using journals from the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College and Google Scholar. All articles were peer-reviewed and were published within the last ten years. The author focused on finding articles connected to mentorship in early childhood education, as CC CDC supports birth-age 5. Due to the limited number of studies, the author also included studies involving mentorship within elementary school settings. The scope of the research allowed the author to consider several variations of effective mentorship within structured programs.

The belief is that students within the early childhood education program at CC will have a stronger experience through meaningful, consistent feedback and coaching. The orientation for the child development specialists will ensure they understand their role as mentors, provide quality feedback, and coach the students to better their practice. Evidence-based practices support having a supportive mentor who communicates effectively and treats the student as part of the team. This shift in mentoring will result in stronger students exiting CC and entering the early childhood education field.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Mentoring in Early Childhood Education**

Providing supportive mentorship that combines practical knowledge with theories results in a well-rounded early childhood educator with confidence in supporting young children's development and needs. Lauren Cummins's (2004) research highlights the issues surrounding mentorship within early childhood education that are still occurring 20 years later. Cummings (2004) explores the need for effective mentorship to support new teachers and provide validation for experienced teachers in an effort to counteract the high turnover rate of early childhood educators. Cummings (2004) research follows a grant-funded course called Mentoring in Early Childhood Education. This course was 15-weeks and provided to a community college to train working educators with a minimum of an associate degree on how to be an effective mentor, the different roles of a mentor, and how to navigate being a mentor within the classroom (Cummins, 2004). There were ten students that took the course and completed the mentor program. The findings from this practical course positively impacted the mentor and mentee through creating ongoing relationships, stronger understanding of the role of mentor, open communication through feedback, and deeper understanding of early childhood education. Along with positively impacting the children in their care through interactions, environment, and curriculum. However, the course did not extend past the grant and there is no research on the courses continuing even without the grant.

The need for strong mentorship in early childhood education continues to be explored at the college level to support teacher retention, quality education, and the children and families within the center and school. Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak (2019) researched a triadic mentorship which included the student teacher, cooperating teacher, and teacher education

college supervisor. The research included eight students, six cooperating teachers, and one college supervisor in which three of the eight triads were studied. The findings resulted in three patterns of interactions which included dissonant, harmonic, and argumentative which occur due to varying backgrounds, experiences, and practices within the triadic relationship. Incorporating the college supervisor into the mentoring dynamic highlighted a lack of symmetry within the coursework and classroom, provided a common understanding on how to support the student teachers through interactive conversations and feedback, and accepting differences among philosophies. Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak (2019) suggested further research is needed to improve the mentoring framework in early childhood education which supports Cummings's (2004) findings that trained mentors provide quality and supportive environments for future teachers.

The need for quality mentors in early childhood education that can support preservice teachers in merging their pedagogical experiences with the reality of a working classroom is necessary to ensure retention of quality teachers. Mahony, Disney, Griffiths, Hazard, and Nutton (2020) researched this topic using 20 preservice early childhood teachers from one university that had on average 67 days of placement experience. Their findings supported the prior research of a disconnect between what is being taught in college classrooms and the realities of a working classroom. This results in conflict between the mentor and college supervisor which can lead the preservice teacher to have concerns about their future in teaching. This proves Cummings's (2004) research that mentors need to be trained in the role of mentoring along with the content and expectations of the student teacher. This leads to support connecting lab schools with preservice teachers to ensure the practices being learned in coursework are being followed within a working classroom.



Eighteen years after Cummings's (2004) research, Visser-Jones and Lui (2022) continued to explore the need for effective mentorship in early childhood education through a mixed-method study. The researchers sent surveys to 520 teacher candidates from seven community colleges with 214 surveys returned partially completed. Their research focused on the correlation between teacher candidates within community colleges that had lab schools on campus and those without and the need for strong mentorship for new teachers. The students with access to a lab school on campus were provided with more effective support and feedback than those within a community site. This study also explored the need for universally accepted standards for quality and qualified supervising teachers as not all mentors are qualified to provide the support and direction to student teachers. This research is in line with Mahoney, et al. (2020), as the connection between the college coursework, mentor's experiences and philosophies, and student teacher's expectations need to align to ensure there is collaboration and communication.

### **Support through Reflection in Teacher Training**

For mentorship to be effective both the mentor and mentee need to learn to be reflective in their practice. Klages, Lundestad, and Sundar (2019), researched an action-and-reflection model to support student teacher's self-development into being a quality teacher. Their research focused on eight leaders in early childhood education centers who mentored new teachers. Klages, et al. (2019) discovered two types of mentoring within their research individual orientation and organizational orientation. The organizational orientation values reflection and provides time and space for new teachers to reflect on practices individually and within a group. This allows for change within the classrooms and room to grow and develop new ideas. While the individual orientation is more focused on how things are done and following traditional methods that can lead to a lack in reflection and growth. Klages, et al. (2019) concluded that

having an organizational orientation will lead to change within the organization to collaborate, evaluate, and revise current practices.

Continuing with leadership being an intricate part of supporting new teachers, Carroll-Lind, Smorti, Ord, and Robinson (2016) researched another model for mentoring and coaching called cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Carroll-Lind et al (2016) research focused on 16 early childhood services and 32 participants for six-week intervals across seven months. This included six workshops interspersed by coaching and mentoring sessions at the centers. The findings support the use of CHAT within mentoring and coaching teachers to understand that they are working together as an organization not individually within the organization. Utilizing and training mentors and coaches to use models such as CHAT and the action-reflection model provide spaces for open reflection to grow and develop, not only new teachers but all teachers (Klages, et al. 2019).

The goal of mentorship is to grow teachers to provide quality care and education. Bonnett and Ly (2016) researched a program called LEAD (learn, encourage, accomplish, and determination) to support new teachers. Their research included seven protégés and seven mentors to determine if LEAD was an effective tool for mentoring new teachers. This yearlong study proved that the mentor/protégé relationship needs to have training prior to building a relationship to ensure each understands their roles and responsibilities. Through LEAD the mentor/protégé used self-reflecting journals and focus groups to support growth, understanding, and increased confidence.

For mentors to connect with student teachers there needs to be respect and support. Lindqvist, Weurlander, Barman, Wenerson, and Thornberg (2023) researched the complex dynamic between the mentor and student teacher to gain insight into perceptions and challenges

faced during work-based learning. The research included 22 mentor teachers that were assigned to student teachers to determine challenges and support necessary to encourage and grow the student teachers. Lindqvist, et al. (2023) findings confirmed that the partnership between the mentor and student teacher needs to be built on trust, communication, and collaboration. Through this relationship, the student teacher can begin to reflect on their own practices, beliefs, and emotions to ensure they begin to understand the role of being a teacher within an active classroom. As with Bonnett and Ly (2016) there is a focus for teachers to begin practicing reflection in their actions and observations. Mentors and student teachers should be nonjudgemental and provide open communication as they begin to use reflection as a tool for growth and learning.

### **Professional Development in Mentoring**

Mentoring a student or preservice teacher requires time and effort from the mentor to provide the support and feedback required to develop a quality teacher. Kupila, Ukkonen-Mikkola, and Rantala (2017) research a mentoring program to support professional development in mentors by defining their role, clarifying required tasks, and exploring how to build a relationship with their student teacher. This qualitative research was four months long and included 36 preschool mentor teachers to preservice students within the early childhood education centers. Kupila, et al. (2017) findings support the need for collaboration between early childhood education instructors, mentors, and the community to ensure there is cohesiveness between the mentoring taking place and the expectations from the college instructors. This research provides evidence for Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak's (2019) research in forming a triadic partnership between the cooperative teacher (mentor), student teacher, and college supervisor. This connection would strengthen the mentor's professional development through

becoming more self-aware within the classroom, more flexible and open to new ideas or different ways of approach and being able to effectively communicate through feedback and reflection. The professional development growth for mentors was a direct result of the mentoring training that was provided through this research.

Within early childhood education centers is a hierarchy of teachers which includes lead teachers mentoring assistant teachers to grow within the center. Cramer and Cappella (2019) researched the dynamics of 120 assistant teachers from 35 early childhood community-based and school-based centers across the United States. This research was conducted through electronic or paper surveys within the fall of 2016. Cramer and Cappella (2019) findings supported the needs for professional development opportunities within the assistant teacher role ensure job satisfaction, growth opportunities, and being seen as an integral part of the classroom. The lead teachers are seen as mentors to the assistant teachers which provides professional development opportunities for them to grow as leaders within the centers. However, lead teachers are not being trained on how to effectively mentor assistant teachers which leads to the assistant teachers not having opportunities to show their knowledge, experience, and expertise. The lack of a mentor program within early childhood education centers is a common theme among researchers; however, this lack is highlighted when relying on lead teachers to grow assistant teachers without guidelines, leadership support, and reflective practices.

One effective way to provide professional development opportunities is through utilizing an e-mentoring-based education program (e-MENT:PT). Erodgan, et al. (2021) researched an e-MENT:PT program on eighteen full-time and nine substitute teachers' mentees with nine academicians working as mentors for two mentees within a preschool setting. This was a two-month mixed method study that focused on the impact of the program on professional

development. The findings supported the use of the program for professional development across all aspects of preschool programs. This research supports the findings from Kupila, et al. (2017) that a mentor program is beneficial for professional development and the growth of a program within early childhood education.

Another form of professional development is to return to higher education to obtain a 2- or 4-year degree. Buettner et al. (2015) researched 175 universities that offer early childhood education program directors within the United States through online surveys. The main findings between the bachelor's and associate degree are that the bachelor's degree focused on knowledge while the associate degree focused on practice. This research confirms that there needs to be cohesion among education courses and the realities of the classroom experience. Each early childhood education program offers similar content, yet some gaps can affect new teachers entering the field especially when they are being supported by untrained mentors that may not know the college curriculum. The research of Kupila, et al. (2017) and Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak (2019) focused on the collaboration between colleges, mentors, and student teachers, but there needs to be more work to ensure consistency among programs, early childhood education sites, mentors, and students.

### **Mentoring results in Quality Teachers and Retention:**

Novice teachers provided with mentors that provide reflective practices and foster professional development ensure quality teachers that will remain within the field of early childhood education. Evans et al. (2021) delve into a cross-comparative study that researches Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to support initial teacher education to provide quality and retention within the profession. Evans, et al. (2021) reviewed Sweden, Scotland, Canada, and Australia ESD including policies, curriculum, reports, and guidelines. The findings

showed that although the ESD is to provide commonality there are still discrepancies between all four countries for some follow the ESD while other countries are not using a systematic approach to adhering to the ESD policies and framework. This creates a gap within the teacher education program which can affect the quality of teaching along with retaining quality teachers within the field.

Turnover in early childhood education and care has been a concern, yet little is done to support the teachers to remain within the profession. The top reasons for turnover are stress, pay, lack of growth opportunities, and life changes. Thorpe et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative survey study between June 2015-January 2016 which included 916 early childhood education and care teachers, daycare center teachers, and stand-alone pre-k teachers surrounding retention, well-being, and staff turnover. The findings showed that staff turnover and stress were the leading factors in the lack of job satisfaction and being able to provide quality care and education to young children. As government and programs continue to increase quality expectations and professionalism within early childhood care and education, there is very little action taken to support the teachers through the changes, provide professional development opportunities, recognize those providing quality care and education, or increase pay to match job expectations. High turnover not only affects the staff but also puts stress on the children and families attending the program.

To begin to provide support for early childhood professionals, Mowery (2020) researched mentorship within pre-kindergarten centers to support networking and professional culture. The study included 75 participants from three pre-kindergarten centers. The findings from this study showed the importance of building trust and autonomy among educators, mentorship networks that include assistant teachers, and teachers must understand the culture of the school to know

the hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities. The inclusion of assistant teachers within mentoring and networking supports previous research from Cramer and Cappella (2019) who understand the value of assistant teachers to provide support and knowledge of the children within the classroom. Through networking, teachers are able to collaborate and communicate to build a community of support and development. Teachers can feel isolated so providing avenues to connect will strengthen the quality of the programs and overall wellbeing of the educators.

Building a community for educators of connection and support not only provides a foundation for retention and quality, but it also benefits the children and families. According to Buckley et al. (2020) incorporating a quality improvement program such as Young Knocknaheeny Area Based Childhood Programme can not only improve child outcomes but also improve the quality of teaching. Buckley et al. (2020) included seven centers with 14 individual rooms for this study lasting between 2015-2017 with monthly workshops to mentor and coach. Through implementation of this program there was a significant increase in quality of the classrooms, increase in mentoring and coaching, and improved leadership support which is directly related to retaining high quality educators within quality programs. Early childhood education and care settings that offer quality programming attract quality teachers; however, there needs to be strong mentorship within the settings to ensure continuation of quality to support the care and education of young children and their families.

### **School Profile**

The CC CDC is a lab school located on the main campus in a suburb town that provides care for students, faculty, staff, and the public and hands-on experience for the students attending the early childhood education (ECE) program at CC. The CC CDC has three classrooms that include observation booths: infants through 2 years, 2- to 3- 3-year-olds, and 3 to 5-year-olds. Each classroom has two full-time child development specialists, part-time work-study substitute teachers, and students attending the CC ECE program. Forty-two children within the center may attend full or part-time. The center is open Monday-Friday 7:00-5:00 (fall and spring semester) or 7:30-4:30 (summer semester). The center is closed when CC classes are not in session.

The CC ECE students participate in practicums within the lab school for the following courses: guidance, curriculum, field experience, and internship. Guidance and curriculum courses are for three hours once a week, field experience is for ten hours once a week, and internship is for a maximum of 20 hours per week. Field experience and internship students are provided a specific mentor within the classroom to provide feedback, support, and modeling. Students within the ECE program may attain an ECE certificate, EC Program Administration certificate, ECE diploma, and ECE associate degree. The ECE students have varying experience levels and range in age and personality. The students can choose which classroom they prefer for their lab experiences, and there is one lab instructor who supports their practicum.

There is a Family Advisory group that any parent can join and participate in conversations about the center and upcoming events for the center. Parents are recognized as their children's first teachers and valuable classroom members. The center offers at least one parent event each semester. There is a culminating event for our semester project, which includes



field experience students showcasing their work and a family event to support socialization among families. Parents fill out a yearly survey to share their care, communication, and curriculum satisfaction. Parents can participate in development conferences in the fall and spring semesters to discuss their child's development and goals. Parents are also an intricate part of the ECE students' education by having their children participate in activities, allowing students to observe and assess their child, providing interviews with the students if applicable, and supporting parent partnerships to help ECE students become comfortable with having conversations at drop off and pick up.

The CC CDC's mission contains a commitment to the unified purpose of providing high quality early care and education for children of CC students, staff and faculty while building skills and knowledge for Early Childhood Education students through hands-on education. The CC CDC's philosophy supports the belief that children learn best when: They are given a variety of developmentally appropriate activities, are exposed to a variety of ideas and concepts with a wide array of hands-on experiences, feel safe and secure, receive nutritionally balanced meals, are guided and directed with positive, non-punitive techniques and expectations are clear, overt and age appropriate. Part of the ECE program is to teach the students going through the program how to accomplish and incorporate the mission and philosophy into their lab experiences. The ECE students are expected to follow all policies and procedures for licensing, (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Iowa Quality for Kids (IQ4K) accreditation expectations.

The ECE students' learning goals vary depending on the course and program they are attending. There are more expectations and responsibilities as the student progresses through the program. Students vary in temperament, experience, and age, which can dictate the support and

encouragement they receive from their mentors. Mentors fill out observation forms on the students that count towards their grades and that they are expected to reflect on as part of their course grades. The level of feedback from the mentor depends on the student's course. The student's participation within the lab classroom dictates their feedback from their mentor.

### **Needs Assessment**

The main area of improvement needed for child development specialists (mentor) is a professional development orientation on how to be an effective mentor. Currently, there are no written guidelines or expectations on how each mentor supports, encourages, or provides written and verbal feedback. The current process involves on the job "figuring it out as you go" which is a disservice to not only the mentor but the ECE student (mentee) being mentored. Four courses that utilize the CC CDC for lab and each course has specific content that must be modeled, observed, and provided feedback. However, the mentors are not provided with course content or a summary of the course, and the mentors are not provided time to review the feedback forms before the observation begins. Due to the lack of knowledge and insight, the mentor may not have a clear understanding of what to model or observe to provide effective feedback.

The four courses that utilize the CC CDC are guidance, curriculum, field experience, and internship. Guidance and curriculum are three hours once a week for eight weeks. The guidance students are to build relationships with the children and begin to use positive guidance strategies that are outlined in the class. Curriculum is split between curriculum one and curriculum two and these students are responsible for completing a punch card of experiences within the classroom such as leading snack or a transition. They are also responsible for providing four center activities with one week the mentee observes the mentor and then the next week the mentee provides an experience for the children in that center. Field experience and internship are

complete after 150 hours within the classroom are documented. These students are typically one day a week for 10 hours with 30-40 hours (respectively) of lead teaching. All four lab experiences have observation feedback forms for the mentor to complete and return to the lab instructor. The forms have a rubric for the mentors to complete along with space for comments; however, the completion of the forms is subjective to the mentor. The professional development needs to provide an overview of each course, an overview of the feedback forms and expectations when completing, along with key components for the mentors to be modeling to ensure consistency and effectiveness of the feedback and experience for the mentees.

### **Data Analysis**

The data used to support this school improvement plan is from the student evaluation surveys on their mentors from fall 2022, spring 2023, and fall 2023. The survey covers eight areas, including the onsite mentor is friendly and respectful, the onsite mentor communicates directly and regularly with the mentee, the onsite mentor models effective practices, the onsite mentor encourages student skill development and provides constructive feedback, onsite mentor looks for opportunities to involve mentee in the classroom, onsite mentor completes evaluations in detail, the onsite mentor provides support and encouragement, onsite mentor creates a welcome environment for mentees and children. The data collected includes the number of students per semester and results from the survey. The students chose either frequently, occasionally, or rarely for each statement. Students were also provided the option to skip a response. They could provide comments on their responses; however, to maintain confidentiality, the researcher was not provided access to those comments.

Table 1 provides the results from the fall semester of 2022. There were fourteen students surveyed. The questions with the most frequent responses are onsite mentor is friendly and

respectful and onsite mentor creates a welcoming environment for the student and the children. The responses that showed a rare response included onsite mentor communicates directly and regularly, onsite mentor encourages skill development and provides constructive feedback, onsite mentor looks for opportunities to include student in classroom, and onsite mentor completes evaluations in detail. The results from this survey show the need for improvement within the mentor program.

Table 2 provides the results from the spring semester of 2023. There were seventeen students that participated in the survey. The survey shows an increase in positive responses with onsite mentors creates a welcoming environment for students and the children resulting in all seventeen surveyed providing a frequent response. However, there still needs to be improvement with onsite mentor completes evaluations in detail and my onsite mentor communicates directly and regularly with the student. The results support the need for a mentor improvement plan.

Table 3 provides the results from fall semester of 2024 and had four students participate. The results show that one student did not have a positive experience. Without access to comments or lab reflections the reason is unclear, but the experience could have stemmed from having a personality conflict with the mentor or it could be a deeper issue that may be improved by implementing this mentor improvement plan.

The data supports a weakness with the mentor's encouragement of student skill development and constructive feedback, completion of evaluation forms with detail, and providing the mentee opportunities within the classroom. The reasons for the weaknesses could be a need for the mentors to have a clearer understanding of their role for each lab student, depending on their course. The mentors must fully understand the expectations for the course and student participation within the course to support the students wholly and appropriately

within the programs. There are levels within each course with scaffolding degrees of involvement from the students that mentors need to understand. An appropriate training for the mentors would clarify expectations for the students within the courses and the minimum level of engagement within the classroom for each student.

The strengths from the data show that the mentors are welcoming, friendly, and respectful to the mentees. The strengths show that the weaknesses may be due to a lack of understanding of the mentors' roles and the mentees' expectations. Mentors can be instructed on how to complete evaluation forms, include the students within the classroom, and provide constructive feedback; however, being welcoming, friendly, and respectful are traits that cannot be taught. These traits prove that the mentors want the students in the classroom to be successful, but they may need to learn the parameters of expectations. The strengths will support the weaknesses as this school improvement plan clarifies and defines roles.

An additional assessment to support the school improvement plan would be an anonymous survey of the mentors. This would provide further information on areas of confusion, clarify any misconceptions, and ensure the school improvement plan supports the mentors in fully understanding their role. The survey could provide clarity to the course instructors on information lacking within the mentor program to further support the mentees within the program.

Table 1: Survey results from fourteen lab students in Fall 2022.

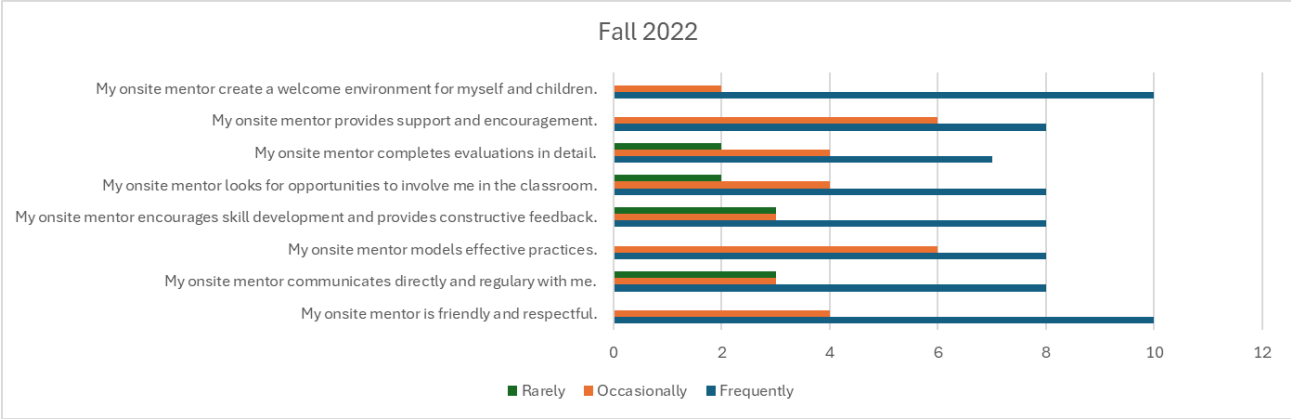


Table 2: Survey results from seventeen lab students in Spring 2023.

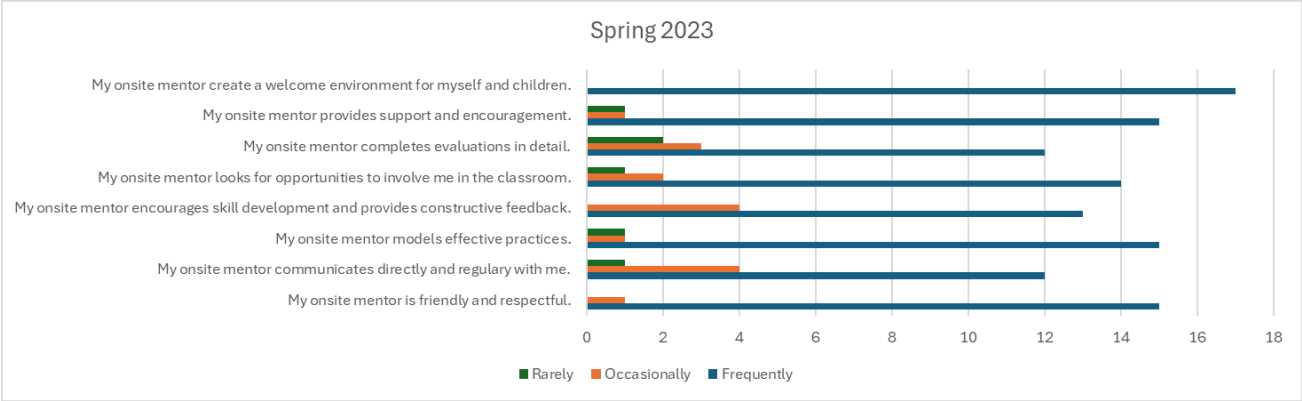
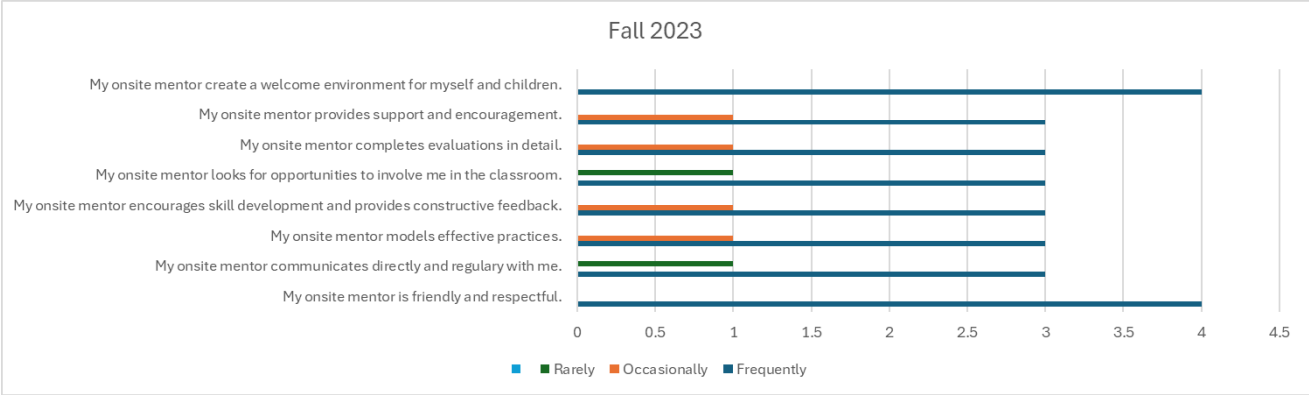


Table 3: Survey results from four lab students in Fall 2023.



### **Action Plan**

Education and training in being a mentor is as important as providing education and training to the mentee. According to Kupila et al. (2017), "mentoring relationships are most effective when mentors are trained for their role" (p.36). This is often overlooked when assigning mentors to mentees. Most mentor relationships in early childhood education result from convenience, experience, and, if possible, education; however, this does not guarantee a strong mentorship relationship or experience. Visser-Jones and Liu (2022) researched the effectiveness of lab schools on campuses in supporting early childhood education. The three main themes from this research highlight the supervising teacher (mentor) is helpful in providing resources, strategies, encouragement, and improvement resulting from feedback; the early childhood faculty is available as they are onsite to provide guidance and communication, which forms a strong relationship, and experiences of teacher candidates on student teaching sites are convenient, hands-on, collaborative, and provide continuity within the program. This school improvement plan supports a lab school for a community college's early childhood education program. The lab school is on campus and provides many of the benefits found in Visser-Jones and Liu's research; however, there needs to be a formal training program to ensure that the student's needs are being fully met within the program.

The research on effective mentorship and coaching within early childhood education often relies on narratives, reflections, and observations. Kupila et al. (2017) have shown that mentor training is about more than just understanding the meaning of being a mentor and the associated responsibilities. It's also about learning how to partner with the mentees to ensure the relationship is supportive, positive, and effective and results in the retention of the mentees within the career. This mutual understanding is crucial, as the mentee also needs to understand

their role within the classroom and what to expect from their mentor. Many mentees have never had a mentor before and may not fully understand the role of a mentor in their education experience.

The school improvement plan is to provide professional development training that will be included within the new orientation materials for child development specialists at CC CDC on how to be effective mentors through meaningful feedback and coaching to the students attending the early childhood education program. Through the provided data and research, the school improvement plan needs to include a description of the courses that utilize the lab school, expectations of the students within each course, expectations on mentors, and create common knowledge of what it means to be a mentor, how to deliver feedback both written and verbal that will prompt reflection, and how to support and connect with the mentee to create a partnership within the classroom. The professional development training will include current child development specialists with two to thirty years of experience at the lab school with various education and career backgrounds. The primary goal of professional development training is to ensure that child development specialists have a common understanding of their role as mentors and the needs of the students within the ECE program. CC CDC follows a continuity of care model, which means the teachers transition with the children to different aged classrooms. This results in the child development specialists working in a new classroom and with a different co-teacher. Identifying a common understanding of mentorship across all mentors and classrooms will ensure the students are provided a consistent and meaningful experience regardless of classroom and mentor.

The professional development training will be comprehensive, incorporating input from ECE instructors to ensure consistency from coursework to classroom. The training will review



the courses that require mentors, the support required by the mentor, building relationships, and how to provide effective and meaningful feedback. It will also include role-playing situations, feedback forms from the instructors for assessment and discussion, and problem-solving challenging situations that may arise from mentoring within a working classroom. This formalized professional development training on meaningful mentorship will ensure continuity within the program and a stronger partnership with students attending the program.

**Early Childhood Education Courses with labs at the Community College:**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Course Description</b>	<b>Lab School Attendance</b>
<b>Guidance</b>	Focuses on effective approaches and positive guidance strategies for supporting the development of all children. Students observe for and utilize strategies taught in Guidance Course.	3 hours once per week for eight weeks. Typically offered during fall semesters and only in 2-year-old and preschool classrooms.
<b>Curriculum</b>	Students practice the selection and use of assessment techniques, plan and set up age, individually and culturally appropriate learning centers, activities and group experiences for young children. Emphasis is on understanding children’s developmental stages, identifying and participating in appropriate learning opportunities, interactions and environments in the following areas: emergent literacy, math, science, technology, social studies, creative art, music and movement, dramatic play, fine and gross motor play and outdoor experiences. Students use and observe curriculum experiences taught in Curriculum I and II course.	3 hours once per week for eight weeks. Typically offered during spring semesters and only in 2-year-old and preschool classrooms.

<p><b>Field Experience</b></p>	<p>Supervised practicum experience in selected early childhood settings serving children birth through eight. Includes integration of theory and developmentally appropriate evidence-based practice. Provides an understanding of working with culturally, linguistically and ability diverse young children and families. Emphasizes professional relationships and behavior, appropriate adult/child interactions, basic curriculum planning and program routines.</p>	<p>10 hours per week until 150 hours. Course offered all semesters and classrooms.</p>
<p><b>Internship</b></p>	<p>Students apply skills and knowledge related to children, families, and the profession in a self-selected community-based setting. Students are encouraged to identify a placement that reflects their individual interests in the field. Emphasis on professional expectations and behavior, appropriate interactions, planning, implementation, and assessment and exploring multiple facets of overall program operations.</p>	<p>10-20 hours per week until 150 hours. Courses offered all semesters and classrooms.</p>

### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

The implementation of the school improvement plan will be approved by the CDC's director, instructional coach, CC lab instructor, and chair of the ECE department before the end of spring semester 2024. The child development specialists will complete an anonymous survey on mentorship to support the professional development training and identify strengths and areas of growth at the start of the summer semester of 2024. Before the fall semester of 2024, the child development specialists will attend professional development training on mentoring to provide effective and meaningful feedback and coaching for the ECE students attending the CDC for labs.

The professional development training will define mentorship at the CC CDC, clarify courses that utilize the CDC for labs, identify the mentor's responsibilities to connect modeling with course material, and how to optimize the observation feedback forms to provide effective and meaningful feedback for each course. The child development specialist will role-play scenarios observed within the lab school and responses that would provide support, direction, and clarity for the students. There will be monthly sessions at staff meetings to support the mentoring within the classrooms. Child development specialists can have this time to support each other through conversations, best practices, and sounding boards to ensure they continue providing effective and meaningful mentorship for the lab students.

The CDC director, instructional coach, lab instructor, and ECE chair will approve the professional development training, ensuring policies, procedures, and course materials are being modeled and followed. The instructional coach and lab instructor will support the mentors throughout the semester to ensure consistency and effectiveness of mentorship within the classrooms. The lab instructor will continue to assign classrooms and mentors to the students

within the ECE program. At the same time, the instructional coach will ensure the mentors are modeling and presenting quality early childhood education within the classrooms.

The child development specialists (mentors) will utilize the information from the professional development training to continue to model quality early childhood education, focusing on connecting the course content with practices taking place in real-time within the CDC's classrooms. This connection will further support the students in understanding the learned theories within their lab experience. Following the professional development training, mentors can connect the coursework with practices when providing verbal and written feedback to the students. The mentor will be responsible for ensuring the feedback provided is connected to coursework content, policies and procedures, and best practices instead of personal preferences and opinions. Through the professional development training, the mentors will have a clearer understanding and expectation of their role, which will provide effective and meaningful feedback to the students within the classrooms.

The ECE students (mentees) are prepped for expectations within the lab school classrooms by the lab instructor at the start of the class. The mentees are provided with clear expectations of their role within the current course, how to conduct themselves within the classroom, and expectations of the child development specialists (mentors) within the classroom. The mentees are also provided an overview of what to expect within each classroom, including the children's ages, the number of children in the classrooms, and any behavioral or developmental needs. The lab instructor provides a tour of the classrooms on the first day of the lab so the mentees can locate essential items and view the classrooms if they are new to the lab classrooms. The mentees understand that they are observed not only by their mentors and lab instructor but also by anyone in the observation booth within each classroom, including other

instructors, students, AEA personnel, or parents. The mentees are made aware that feedback from their mentors will include verbal, in-the-moment feedback, modeling, verbal feedback at the end of their lab session, and written feedback on observation forms. All of the feedback provided is to support and grow the mentee's abilities within the profession and program.

Monitoring the mentorship program will happen throughout the semester as students provide feedback to the lab instructor, observe growth within the classroom, and make a connection from lab to coursework. However, the primary data source will be from the end-of-semester survey that students complete based on their mentor experience. This data will show if the mentor's professional development training was effective or if adjustments need to be made for the following semester. The lab instructor works closely with the students and child development specialists throughout the semester and, through observations and conversations, will be able to tell if the clarification of the mentor role is improving the quality of mentorship within the classrooms. The child development specialists will retake the anonymous mentor survey at the end of the fall semester of 2024, and the results will be compared with the initial survey conducted in the summer semester of 2024 to determine success or future areas of growth. The monthly staff meetings will provide an additional way of monitoring the success of the training through conversations, understanding of role and course content, and providing effective feedback that directly relates to course content or policies and procedures.

Though the school improvement plan is a necessary addition to the program, barriers and challenges will arise. One main challenge will be the personalities of the mentors and mentees. The lab instructor does their best to match mentors and mentees with compatible personalities, but this is not always possible. This can result in miscommunications and an unsatisfactory experience for both. Clarifying the role of the mentor and the expectations for the mentee will

provide talking points to support the interactions between the mentee and the mentor. Another challenge is when mentors do not change or modify how they provide written and verbal feedback. This can result in the mentees not feeling supported, welcome, or successful within the program, which could lead them to drop out of the ECE program. Providing a supportive and welcoming environment in which to learn and grow will result in student retention, hopefully leading to retention within the field. A barrier could be that the mentee is in the program for purposes other than the love of early childhood education, or they have existing experience that aligns differently with the policies and procedures of the CDC or ECE program. This could lead to the student's dismissal from the program if policies and procedures are not followed or the health and safety of the children are in jeopardy. It can also lead to the mentor not being effective, as their feedback and modeling are met with indifference or defensiveness. This barrier is closely observed by the lab instructor, course instructor, and director of the CDC to ensure the children's and program's safety. The lab instructor does a professional job of discussing options with the student to transfer out of the program or to understand the importance of following all policies and procedures put in place within the ECE program and CDC.

### **Conclusion**

Mentorship within early childhood education is often overlooked or provided by untrained personnel. This results in unqualified teachers, low retention rates, and ineffective early childhood education taking place within the classroom. There is a range of teachers within early childhood education, including those with little to no experience or education, those educated with minimal practical experience, those with no education but years of experience, and those educated with experience. Due to the wide range of teachers, providing trained mentors to newly hired teachers within an early childhood program are challenging. Many programs are short-staffed, with leadership in the classrooms, and have a lot of turnovers, which results in not having long-term teachers for mentors or a lack of understanding of the importance of mentorship within the program. Teachers who are not trained in mentoring view it as an additional task in an already stressful career that is limited in time for any work outside of the immediate needs of the children, or they view mentoring as a hierarchy, not as a partnership.

The aim of this school improvement plan is to enhance the mentorship program at a local community college child development center for the students completing lab work in the early childhood education program. The plan entails providing professional development training to define the mentor's role within the lab school, clarify expectations, understand the courses and course content for the students utilizing the center for lab, and provide effective and meaningful feedback to the students. This will support their growth, retention, and quality within the early childhood education field. The current approach of 'figuring it out as they go along' for the child development specialists within the CDC is a disservice to them and the students. The plan aims to address this by providing a structured approach to communication and feedback, ensuring consistency in experiences for the mentees.

The data underscores the necessity for professional development training on mentorship within the CC CDC. When the students were surveyed about their experiences with the mentors at the CDC, a common trend was that they did not feel encouraged to explore their skill development, were not provided with constructive feedback, the evaluation forms lacked detail, and the mentees were not given opportunities within the classroom. The proposed changes, including clarifying the mentor's role, courses, and content, and providing effective and meaningful feedback, will lead to a stronger support system for the students to grow and develop into quality teachers. The findings will significantly impact the role of mentorship for current and future child development specialists, create a functional learning environment for students, and continue to provide quality care and education within the community college and child development center.



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