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## Teacher professional learning in Early Childhood education: insights from a mentoring program

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### ABSTRACT

In Australia, as is the case in other countries around the world, the Early Childhood workforce is in the process of ‘skilling up’ to meet government demands related to quality service provision. This paper sets out to identify what constitutes effective teacher professional learning through mentoring. Guided by critical realism and social practice as theoretical perspectives, the paper uses data drawn from the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Teachers* (2011–2014), Victoria, Australia. The findings identify four C’s essential to effective professional learning – Context: the association between individual aspirations and systemic requirements; Collegiality: the positioning and importance of collegial relationships; Criticality: critical deliberation in ‘safe’ learning environments; and Change: recognition that teacher learning takes place in the domains of professional dispositions, pedagogical knowledge and social capital. These findings point to the need to consider teachers’ contexts of practice in the design of professional development programs such as mentoring, and to conceptualise learning as a socially situated practice rather than a detached pedagogic event.

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Mentoring; professional learning; Early Childhood workforce; context; collegiality; criticality; change

## Introduction

There is now increased investment in many countries around the world in professionalising the Early Childhood education and care workforce to meet quality programming benchmarks which have been linked to school and employment success later in life (Heckman 2010; Nores and Barnett 2010; OECD 2016). Starting from the late 2000s, the Early Childhood education and care sector in Australia has undergone a series of policy reforms. These reforms have led to policy changes in the sector initiating new expectations and requirements in the areas of quality and participation. The reforms precipitated pedagogic and curricular changes, along with a considerable upgrade in the average qualification and overall professionalism of the workforce. To ensure effective implementation of the policies, there has been a call for more professional learning opportunities for the Early Childhood workforce. This paper explores relational aspects of teacher professional learning through mentoring. It focuses on causal explanation so that we understand under what conditions, why and how Early Childhood teachers learn.

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Effective professional learning can take place in practice itself, from which practitioners draw subliminal 'lessons'. It should be connected to practice partly because, as Timperley (2008) notes, 'Teachers' daily experiences in their practice context shape their understandings, and their understandings shape their experiences' (6). The idea of practice signifies intentionality and regularities in human actions and inactions (Rouse 2001). It refers to organised and purposive forms of human activities – doings, sayings and underlying practical knowledge of agents involved in these activities. That is, practice involves thinking and acting against the backdrop of one's goals, values, understandings, beliefs and commitment as well as in relation to expectations and rules in a social setting. As professional learning is primarily learning about and for practice, it needs to be embedded within teachers' work thereby enabling them to investigate, evaluate and draw conclusions about their existing pedagogic practices. As Orlikowski (2002) argues, 'knowing is not a static embedded capability or stable disposition of actors, but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world in practice' (249). The learning experiences need to be relevant to the context of practice – from the classroom to the national policy landscape. In research that mapped the state of professional learning in Australia, Doecke et al. (2008) argue, 'Much professional knowledge is anchored in the specific contexts in which teachers operate' (27). In an extensive review of empirical and theoretical studies on professional learning of teachers, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) underscore that an effective professional learning program such as teacher mentoring needs to be intensive, ongoing, collegial and job-embedded. As an essential method of inducting newly qualified teachers, mentoring supports effective transition from the context of education to the field of practice (Jokinen, Heikkinen, and Morberg 2012; Lindberg 2010). It is also a tool for professional growth. A transformative mentoring experience is one that emphasises the 'primacy of personal experience; negotiation of understanding; the practical knowing informed by theory; and applied theory shaped by human values' (Mullen 1999, 13). It offers reciprocal and mutual learning opportunities.

*The State-wide Professional Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Teachers (2011–2014)* funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, offered an accessible professional learning opportunity for newly qualified and professionally isolated Early Childhood educators across the state of Victoria, Australia. The program was predominantly a one-to-one interaction between a mentor and a mentee. Each mentor was allocated up to five mentees whom they meet individually at the mentee's workplace. There was also an opportunity for the mentor to meet all the mentees collectively as a group during the Shared Learning Days or on the online platform created specifically for the program.

The mentoring program ensured access to regular, targeted support from experienced colleagues with the hope of enabling focused discussions around pedagogy, knowledge building of the new quality imperatives (such as the national and state frameworks to guide practice), increasing skills and confidence, and in so doing assisting with the delivery of quality Early Childhood programs. It also provided opportunities for experienced Early Childhood teachers to develop their mentoring skills, thus building their leadership capacity in the Early Childhood sector. The program included individual meetings of mentees with their mentors, Shared Learning Days where all participants came together to share experiences and undertake professional learning, a purpose built website to support conversations between mentoring activities, and resources to support mentoring and mentoring discussions. This large-scale research project explored 'How best to create an effective, sustainable

mentoring program for Early Childhood educators in Victoria'. Focusing on the Early Childhood teacher as an illustrative case, the paper explores the experiences of mentees and mentors in this recently completed mentoring program in the state of Victoria. It addresses the research question: What constitutes effective teacher professional learning through mentoring?

The remainder of the paper is organised into three major sections. The first section briefly discusses the theoretical and methodological orientations that inform the paper, and outlines sources of data. The second section presents four themes as key findings of the study. Finally, the concluding section reiterates the main points highlighted in the paper, and includes implications for teacher professional learning programs.

### **Theoretical orientation, methodology and data**

We see professional learning through mentoring as a social practice, emphasising the interplay between subjective meaning systems and objective conditions of the social space where learning takes place. While objective structures may entail institutional arrangements and administrative norms, the subjective element of practice is represented by what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as habitus. Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as a 'system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' (83). Habitus is not a result of conscious learning or an ideological imposition – it is rather acquired through a gradual process of inculcation – early socialisation, education and acculturation. In other words, as a result of the internalisation of external structures, the body becomes 'a repository of ingrained dispositions that certain actions, certain ways of behaving and responding, seem altogether natural' (Thompson 1991, 13). As a set of generative dispositions that function as schemes of perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu 1990), habitus guides actions and interactions in a field of practice, including the Early Childhood education space. In any field of practice (e.g. classrooms where pedagogic work is enacted), regularity and coherence of practices manifest embodied, practical knowledge of agents regarding 'what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not' (Thompson 1991, 13). Early Childhood educators' professional dispositions are shaped by, and shape, everyday pedagogic experiences, including teaching and mentoring. In analysing learning experiences of mentoring participants as a form of social practice, we are particularly interested in documenting the transformation of 'practice-provoking dispositions' of the educators.

Understanding the dynamic of social practices such as mentoring necessitates an interpretive methodological orientation. Beyond description and explanation of events, experiences and objects, social inquiry can also be an interpretive, critical undertaking that enables the researcher to 'reveal what everyday thought fails to register' (Sayer 2010, 216). The paper draws on critical realism (Bhaskar 2008; Sayer 2000) as a theoretical perspective to make sense of the qualitative data generated during the mentoring process. A critical realism approach is suitable for 'intensive' qualitative analysis guided by questions such as 'what produces change?' and 'how do we explain the causation?' It acknowledges that as researchers we do not have direct access nor complete access to the 'real', therefore we can only construct our understandings from its manifestations. With a focus on subjective experiences and perceptions, interpretive inquiry assumes that any attempt to understand social reality such as professional learning needs to be grounded in the experiences of the participants.

Bourdieu (1990) positions knowledge as deriving from uncovering causal relations and interpretive explanations of the link between tacitly positioned structures (e.g. rules, dispositions and values) and the practice they produce. Although a stable disposition functions ‘below the level of consciousness and language’ (Bourdieu 1984, 466), it is possible to capture its manifestations through opinions, assumptions, statements of beliefs and actions (Steensen 2009). In other words, it is possible to grasp unobservable aspects that generate practice through examining their effects as observed in the field or articulated by the participants themselves. Knowledge is socially constructed from accounts and perspectives of social actors who are prompted to engage in meaning making by the researcher. In exploring everyday meanings, underlying assumptions and practical concerns of mentees and mentors, we triangulate data sources and data collection methods so that the empirical data can better reflect the realities in mentoring experiences. The interview and discussion questions were constructed in such a way that they can initiate self-assessment and reflexive deliberation.

The data for this article derive from one cohort of Early Childhood educators (mentees and mentors) who participated in the statewide mentoring program. It consists of five datasets, these being: application statements (84 mentees and 26 mentors), Pre-Mentoring Program Evaluation (PMPE) statements (65 mentees and 21 mentors), Post-Mentoring Program Evaluation (POMPE) statements (60 mentees and 24 mentors), Shared Learning Day reports from mentees and mentors, as well as interviews and focus group discussions with 15 Early Childhood Coordinators and preschool Cluster Managers in selected city councils across the state of Victoria where other mentoring programs were being implemented. Data were analysed using inductive analysis (Thomas 2006), where data were carefully read and coded, identifying themes (Flick 2007). Meaningful text segments were extracted from the data that were used as markers to identify relevant sections of the data for coding. Four categories were developed as findings from the themes which were then synthesised with the literature (Marshall and Rossman 2006). The four categories – context, collegiality, criticality and change are discussed next using Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (Rawolle and Lingard 2013).

## Findings and discussion

Findings of the study cover dimensions of learning experiences and learning outcomes valued by mentees and mentors. With respect to learning experiences, the findings show that intersecting *contextual* factors make mentoring a necessity for professional learning of newly qualified and professionally isolated mentees; mentees and mentors alike value *collegiality* as a core element of an effective mentoring program; and taking advantage of the collegial and ‘safe’ environment, mentees were engaged in *critical reflection*. When it comes to learning outcomes, professional development programs such as mentoring are instrumental in developing core attributes of effective teachers, including professional competence and ongoing learning capability. Professional learning outcomes involve ‘changes in professionally relevant thinking, knowledge, skills, habits of mind, or commitments’ that manifest in teachers’ capacity for practice, and actual changes in their practice (Knapp 2003, 114). In our study, participants of the mentoring program reported *changes* (or learning) in the areas of professional dispositions, pedagogic knowledge and social capital. These findings are briefly discussed here in turn.

Finding 1: intersecting *contextual* factors make mentoring a necessity for professional learning of newly qualified and professionally isolated mentees.

Teachers enact their practices in a specific context where certain skills and knowledge are valued. Context also includes current status, expectations and intentions of teachers involved in the practice. Social practices are anchored in specific fields. They are not arbitrary as they are guided by tacit field-specific rules internalised by the teachers forming dispositions that dictate how they respond in future practices (Wacquant 2011). Hence, the focus of empirical analysis of context of the practice of Early Childhood teachers needs to focus on the validity of professional competence and skills across and within fields. The central questions are: Why do mentees need to participate in the mentoring program? To what do they aspire? The empirical data show that issues of *transition*, *isolation*, and *policy change* intersect to make mentoring a necessity for most of the participants.

In a social practice such as teaching, each field values its own capital (Bourdieu 1990), with specific resources (capital) more highly valued than others. *Transition* accentuates the situated nature of knowledge by highlighting the role of cross-field experiences in the formation of teachers' dispositions/professional values (Rawolle 2005). Moving from pre-service teaching to a graduate teaching position, or moving from being a primary school teacher to an Early Childhood teacher, means what is valued in one field may not be as valued in another. This positions teachers' professional knowledge as provisional and changeable as a direct result of context (Doecke et al. 2008). As reported in the data, many mentors noted that one of the most pressing issues that newly qualified Early Childhood teachers could face is transitioning from theory-oriented teacher education courses to the actual teaching practice in an Early Childhood setting. As one mentor stated, Early Childhood graduates 'are coming out with little idea of really what it's like [to be an Early Childhood teacher]'. One Early Childhood Coordinator points out,

the very start of the year can be challenging because they [Early Childhood teacher graduates] haven't got experience at the start of the year, with the new parents coming in, and establishing the relationships and the requirements with the administration side

This perceived lack of professional knowledge and experience was also echoed in mentees responses such as:

The reason that I am wanting to take part in this program is to build upon my strategies for behaviour management and positive reinforcement, coping and teaching strategies that we are not taught within tertiary studies. (Mentee, Statement of Purpose)

In all cases, our data showed that transition entails issues of confidence, competence, and belonging.

It is clear from the data that mentees were drawn to participate in the mentoring program as a way of overcoming their feelings of professional *isolation*, as the following data excerpts represent:

I haven't met any other kindergarten teachers and feel isolated in terms of talking about my challenges, exchanging ideas, and asking questions. (Mentee, PMPE)

As a graduate in a rural setting I feel I needed some extra support in my first year by someone working as a kindergarten professional. (Mentee, PMPE)

Need for support – feeling very isolated in a specialized field. (Mentee, PMPE)

Participants spoke of their concerns in relation to accessing timely professional support coupled with a lack of confidence in their practices, which acted to escalate their feelings of isolation. A lack of professional learning can set crucial limits on teachers within 'the field of practice' (Bourdieu 1990), making it difficult for these newly qualified teachers to deal with practice matters. A consequence of this for these teachers is a loss of confidence in their abilities. The mentoring program was able to ease this sense of isolation and build confidence as mentoring in general has been proven to have a strong influence on both teacher learning and mitigating professional isolation (Dussault et al. 1999).

Changes in the Early Childhood Education and Care policy field have also put pressure on newly qualified and professionally isolated Early Childhood teachers. In Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia, there is a *new policy landscape* dictated by the National Early Years Reform Agenda setting benchmarks for the sector that influence curriculum, pedagogy, accreditation, qualifications and professionalism. The expectation is that Early Childhood Teachers can implement the necessary changes required by policy initiatives; however, this poses a serious challenge for novice teachers or those more professionally isolated where there is no professional network to support them. Our participants recognised this challenge, with one Early Childhood Coordinator in a northern suburbs local Council area labelling implementing the government initiatives such as the new framework to guide practice as 'pressing issues' for new graduates. The speed at which the changes were made at the government level and rolled out to the sector was also noted by mentors as a strong reason why Early Childhood Teachers needed access to professional development programs. In their PMPE statements, mentees noted that changes in the policy landscape make it necessary that they participate in professional learning. The following excerpts highlight this point:

[...] the areas I feel I will need the most assistance with are the framework and quality standards and how to successfully achieve these in the curriculum. (Mentee, PMPE)

I hope to gain support from an experienced Early Childhood teacher in the areas of programming and planning, National Quality Frameworks and National Quality Improvement plans. (Mentee, PMPE)

The mentoring program was therefore a means of empowering Early Childhood Teachers for effective policy implementation.

Finding 2: mentees and mentors alike value *collegiality* as a core element of an effective mentoring program.

Teacher professional isolation 'occurs when a person's network of social relations at work is deficient in some important ways, either quantitatively or qualitatively'; and is related with teacher 'occupational stress' (Dussault et al. 1999, 944). Professional learning through collegial interactions and networks is particularly essential in times of change (Hargreaves 2000). In mentoring, collegiality makes it possible for participants involved to establish a learning environment where they can safely and collaboratively explore their assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning. Collaboration and collegiality can be seen as central to the participatory learning process. We see collaboration as a means of promoting professional growth, mentor empowerment and reflective practice. A safe learning environment provides an opportunity for collegiality and interdependence among teachers; and thereby evades 'hierarchical structures of expertise' that inhibit collaborative learning (Kelly and Cherkowski 2015). Here we particularly highlight two elements that characterise collegial interactions during the mentoring process: *respect* and *sharing*.

Many mentors viewed a *respectful relationship* with mentees as a vital condition for effective learning. Underscoring the importance of respect, a mentor noted: 'Both parties need to show respect for each other's style of teaching and individual philosophies' (Mentor, Statement of Purpose). In a POMPE statement, another mentor wrote: 'A good mentor and mentee need to be able to listen to each other, [...] work as a team, and understand each other's values and beliefs'. As one mentor stated, a meaningful interactive relationship grounded on mutual respect and recognition makes it possible for mentors and mentees to commit to 'deep engagement rather than "tick the box"' (Mentor, POMPE).

It is evident from the accounts and experiences of the participants of the mentoring program that without some level of trust and respectfulness (collegiality), a mentor can be seen as an intimidating authority figure rather than as someone who offers professional support and guidance for the workplace. Respect also has to do with recognition of existing knowledge, experience and values of those involved in professional learning (Morrissey 2000). For example, mentees valued having their independence, agency and choice acknowledged by the mentors which further highlights the importance of respect in an adult learning setting. At the centre of collegiality is effective communication and collaboration, which enables mentees and mentors to align mutual expectations about the mentoring process. In the statement of purpose, recognising the role of collegiality, a mentor wrote about her aspiration for a meaningful learning experience during the mentoring process as follows:

I would hope to achieve a sound relationship between the mentee and myself. I would aim to see open communication whereby we both feel comfortable sharing ideas and thoughts. [...] The mentor and mentee need to be honest and open to each other. (Mentor, PMPE)

*Sharing*, as reflected in the accounts of the participants of the mentoring program, portrays the idea of experiential learning whereby mentors and mentees engage in collaborative learning. A non-hierarchical relationship during mentoring fosters mutual support and learning. One of the expressions of the significance of collegiality as a key attribute of meaningful professional learning is that, in the POMPE statements, almost all the mentees and the majority of the mentors stressed that the Shared Learning Day sessions were the most important aspect of the program. It was in these sessions that all mentees and mentors came together to share their knowledge, skills and experiences. The data show the mutuality of learning in mentoring processes and how both mentees and mentors benefit from the process.

Finding 3: taking advantage of a collegial and 'safe' learning environment, mentees engage in *critical reflection*.

Criticality is defined here as a disposition to question taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs underpinning one's practice. Reflecting on one's professional practice is a learning process where the questioning of presuppositions and assumptions moves 'to more explicit engagement in the process of critical and creative thinking in order to make connections between experience and learning in practice and practical action' (Nolan and Raban 2016, 248). It acts to uncover 'unthought [and unconscious] categories of habit' (Adkins 2003, 25). In the field of practice, most often, new entrants have three options: to accept and adapt to the rules, to modify the rules, or to leave the field (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, and Meyer 2003). The first two options entail learning through active engagement with structures of the field and critical reflection on one's values and assumptions in relation to the objective structures. In our data, we identify two essential elements of critical reflection: *comfort* and *dilemma*.



In social situations, a sense of *comfort* is both a condition for and an outcome of openness. Collegial and respectful relationships build trust, and create a sense of comfort and safety, which in turn make it possible for participants not only to freely share experiences and ideas, but also to ask questions and seek clarifications on issues that matter. Creating a learning environment where non-judgemental communication is used and confidentiality is ensured assisted participants in the mentoring program to feel a certain level of comfort in discussing their practice. A good mentor was seen as someone who is 'positive' and is 'aware of confidentiality'. For mentors, a good mentee is one who is 'comfortable with and trusting of their mentor'. As one of the mentors noted, respect and openness create a meaningful learning condition:

It is my view that a flourishing mentor and mentee relationship is based upon collaboration, respect and positive and clear communication. [...] A good mentee is required to be willing to listen, accepting of constructive feedback, comfortable with and trusting of their mentor.  
(Mentor, PMPE)

In this respect, mentees and mentors who participated in this research emphasised that the safe learning environment created through the one-to-one interaction with mentors and the friendly Shared Learning Day sessions were vital for them to feel comfortable about discussing their experiences and concerns with colleagues. The extent to which participants value trust, respect and comfort is evident in the list of attributes participants attribute to good mentors and mentees.

This condition of comfort assists participants to freely and reflectively express and confront their *dilemmas*. In a social practice, when an agent's habitus matches the structures (e.g. expectations, norms, assumptions and rules) of the field, there is a 'feel for the game'... 'a practical sense' (Bourdieu 1990). However, when the context in which habitus was formed does not match with the context of its enactment, agents enter into a state of dilemma. In other words, dilemma is an expression of lack of synchronicity between subjective expectations and objective conditions of the field of practice. As such, it is an opportunity for critical deliberation by way of assessing the causes of the disjuncture in the given practice. Providing the conditions under which participants can bring their underlying assumptions and presuppositions into consciousness and open them up to scrutiny has the capacity to change perspectives and subsequently practices (Mezirow 1990). Intentional and 'communicative engagement' with others and subsequent changes in subjective dispositions may trigger dilemma in one's practice (Crossley 2004, 92). Teachers can question their assumptions and values in light of new insights or changing conditions of practices. Most obviously teachers show their reflexive stances when they act as change-agents in their pedagogic action (Oliver and Kettley 2010). In the mentoring project, during the Shared Learning Day sessions, the facilitators created a safe learning environment where mentees and mentors could share their ideas, views and experiences. In those sessions, reflective instances were evident when mentees openly stated: 'My weakness is dealing with conflict', 'There is no right way, it's what is right for me', '[I] am not as organised as I thought', '[I am] guilty', 'Observations are something that I have found a little difficult this year', 'I am learning a lot about my own self-esteem and assertiveness'.

Confounding disruptions trigger reflexivity, a re-examination of doxic beliefs informing professional actions and inactions; and transformative learning emerges from 'uncomfortable reflexive practices' (Pillow 2003, 175). As Timperley (2008) states, 'All learning activities require the twin elements of trust and challenge' (16). In teacher professional learning, mentors need

to help newly qualified teachers challenge their pedagogic assumptions, and present them with 'new possibilities'. Mentoring without critical reflection is simply a passage of 'the unquestioned grammar of teaching' (Hargreaves 2000) from the experienced to the novice; and has little value in terms of changing practices for improved student learning outcomes. Properly guided critical reflection leads to a deeper level of self-knowledge that any effective teacher needs to have. Palmer (1998) contends that 'we teach who we are', and that:

[...] teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. [...] In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my own unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (2)

In this respect, disjuncture disrupts taken-for-granted values and knowledge, and subsequently triggers 'a will to learn' (Van Eekelen, Vermunt, and Boshuizen 2006). However, it is noteworthy that not all stances of critical deliberation lead to transformative learning. On the contrary, it may result in self-justification and self-indulgence. This implies that in practising critical reflection, one needs to be mindful about both the process as well as the goal of the practice.

Finding 4: *change* or learning occurs in the areas of professional dispositions, pedagogic knowledge and social capital.

Learning through mentoring can facilitate a transformation of existing perspectives and/or the acquisition of new ones. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) remind us, the durable dispositions that inform our perception, thought and action are not set in stone, but can be open to invention and improvisation. Bourdieu (2005) stresses: 'Habitus is not a fate, not a destiny' (45). Critical reflexivity offers a way to transform existing habitus through scrutinising one's experiences in light of new knowledge or experiences. Making decisions utilising these critiques of our experiences becomes learning (Mezirow 1990), which may also take the form of acquiring new structures of meaning in light of new 'inputs', with the intention of reinterpreting experiences and devising new strategies.

In the POMPE statements and Shared Learning Day sessions, participants rated the extent to which the mentoring experience helped them to change their professional practices. Considerable gains were reported in relation to ways of teaching and assessing for learning, and creating effective learning environments for children; relationships with children, families and colleagues; and building professional identity and self-efficacy. In other words, as a result of the mentoring program, significant changes were evident in *professional dispositions* and the *professional capital* of mentees.

*Professional dispositions* represent subjectively internalised social structures expressed in the form of personal tendencies, preferences and assumptions about teaching, learning, learners and assessment. Professional disposition is instrumental in informing patterns of behaving, feeling, thinking, doing and interacting in the context of professional practices such as teaching. They signal an unthinking-ness in action (Bourdieu 1990). Relatedly, Diez and Murrell (2010) define professional dispositions of teachers as 'habits of professional action or moral commitments that spur such action' (9). Examples of teacher professional dispositions include confidence, commitment, persistence, curiosity, flexibility and reflexivity. In our data, these dispositions were determined by the way mentees and mentors wrote

about their pedagogic inclinations and tendencies. The notion of confidence was a prominent element of mentees' accounts of professional disposition in this research. Many mentees reported that the mentoring experience helped them achieve confidence, thus building their professional capital:

I gained lots of confidence and feel comfortable, especially as a new teacher. (Mentee, POMPE)

I believe that I gained lots of confidence. I value myself. Positive attitude also building up. (Mentee, POMPE)

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that effective teachers possess a strong asset of *professional capital*, which incorporates three forms of capital - human capital, social capital and decisional capital. Human capital here refers to the teacher's 'qualification, experience and ability to teach', while social capital is related to meaningful 'interactions with peers that centered on instruction', which is based on 'feelings of trust and closeness between teachers' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, 3). Decisional capital is linked with teachers' 'competence, judgment, insight, inspiration, and the capacity for improvisation as they strive for exceptional performance' (5). In our analysis, we represent professional capital as *pedagogic competences* (which includes human and decisional forms of capital) and *social capital*.

*Pedagogical competences* refer to teachers' professional knowledge base and skills, including teaching methodology, knowledge of curriculum, student knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge (e.g. knowledge of current learning theories, multicultural education etc.), knowledge of context, knowledge of self, and pedagogical subject knowledge (Liakopoulou 2011). Achievement in pedagogical competences was evident throughout the mentoring data-set in relation to the learning of both mentees and mentors. For example, during a Shared Learning Day session, a mentee stated: 'Mentoring teaches a solution focused thinking process'. Along those lines, other mentees highlighted their achievements:

I can jump hurdles; I have the skills to find the knowledge. (Mentee, POMPE)

My planning is more relevant to the children. Relationships with the children have been enhanced. (Mentee, POMPE)

As Bourdieu (1977) proposes 'practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse' (83). This speaks to the significant learning outcome of mentees and mentors seen in their ability to reflect on their practices and make changes. Such a change in practice necessitates discursive engagement to understand the habitus underpinning 'practical mastery' in the particular field. In other words, pedagogic competence is closely linked with what Schön (1987) refers to as 'professional artistry', consisting of knowledge and skills that teachers draw on in enacting their professional practices.

*Social capital* is a key attribute of the professional capital of teachers (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). Through the mentoring program engagement with other participants facilitated a new professional network – a network of continuing professional learning. This sense of connection to the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, through being part of the mentoring program, built participants' social capital as the following excerpts from mentees illustrate:

The bridging is an important tool from Uni[versity] to workforce and [I am] feeling connected to the industry [Early Childhood]. (Mentee, POMPE)

Having someone in the field to air concerns, ask for suggestions and talk with has been an amazing help this year. (Mentee, POMPE)

My feeling of alienation has gone and my self-doubt has significantly decreased and my confidence overtaking. (Mentee, POMPE)

The interdependent nature of professional learning communities highlights the importance of shared expertise and collaborative networks. In other words, as a professional learning outcome, social capital is generative in that it makes possible collective inquiry and reflection, which in turn leads to further learning. Social capital speaks to a form of 'collective capacity' as collaborative cultures 'accumulate and circulate knowledge and ideas, as well as assistance and support, that help teachers become more effective, increase their confidence, and encourage them to be more open to and actively engaged in improvement and change' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, 114).

## Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the interaction of subjective structures and objective conditions of constraints and possibilities of teacher learning. It identifies what constitutes effective teacher professional learning through mentoring by examining assumptions underpinning regularities in dispositions and actions as well as in values, understandings and goals of the Early Childhood Teachers involved in the *State-wide Professional Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Teachers* in Victoria, Australia. As a professional learning strategy, mentoring builds the professional capacities of Early Childhood educators, which manifest in confidence in their practices. The findings highlight four aspects significant to effective professional learning – the context being the association between individual aspirations and systemic requirements, collegiality which encompasses the positioning and importance of collegial relationships, critical deliberation in 'safe' learning environments, and change through the recognition that teacher learning takes place in the domains of professional dispositions, pedagogical knowledge and social capital. We contend that for professional learning to be effective it must take these aspects into account and conceptualise learning as a socially situated practice, thereby underscoring the importance of social participation and interaction.

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