



# Best practices in mentoring: complexities and possibilities

Best practices  
in mentoring

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Received 8 March 2013

Revised 3 June 2013

20 July 2013

Accepted 9 August 2013

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to describe the complexity that underlies categorizing best practices in the field of mentoring. A further purpose is to propose a way to deal with this issue in order to begin to develop and identify research-based best practices in mentoring in education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a conceptual paper proposing a structure for identifying best practices in mentoring.

**Findings** – The field of mentoring is replete with suggestions about best practices in education, but many are unsubstantiated by empirical research. The authors believe this is due in part to the breath of mentoring resulting in the use of so many different terms, conceptualizations, and applications that it is difficult for practitioners to converse about mentoring and for researchers to synthesize what is already known. They suggest an additional problem is the ambiguity regarding the term best practice. The authors cite these challenges and offer suggestions for defining best practices and synthesizing the literature across contexts.

**Originality/value** – The value of the paper is in the awareness it creates and in the possibilities it presents. By outlining the complex factors related to mentoring best practices, scholars will better understand the constraints that limit our ability to harness all that is known about mentoring best practices. Further, the authors offer a unique way to approach this task, utilizing a collaborative team approach across contexts.

**Keywords** Mentor, Mentoring, Mentee, Protégé, Best practices

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Mentoring in educational contexts has become a rapidly growing field of practice and study around the globe (Fletcher and Mullen, 2012). The prevalence of mentoring has resulted in the mindset that “everyone thinks they know what mentoring is, and there is an intuitive belief that mentoring works” (Eby *et al.*, 2010, p. 7).

While mentoring may not have a positive effect on individuals in all circumstances, there is extensive documentation of the benefits of mentoring, both in the areas of career development and psychosocial enhancement (Mullen, 2011). For example, in an analysis of over 300 research-based mentoring articles in the fields of education, business, and medicine, Ehrich *et al.* (2004) found that mentoring yields positive outcomes including learning, personal growth, and development in professional abilities. In another meta-analysis of 426 journal articles on mentoring, Dominguez (2012) identified 34 different positive mentor outcomes, 49 mentee benefits, and 13 organizational enhancements from mentoring endeavors. In education, mentoring for new teachers has been identified as a strong factor in retention (Menter *et al.*, 2010), as well as in the development of new teachers’ self-confidence, ability to make changes to practice, understanding of subject matter, and use of a wider repertoire of strategies to match pupil needs (Cordingley and Buckler, 2012). Thus, there is empirical research



International Journal of Mentoring  
and Coaching in Education  
Vol. 2 No. 3, 2013  
pp. 189-203

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
2046-6854  
DOI 10.1108/IJMC-07-2013-0040

undergirding the premise that mentoring is a construct that enhances growth in individuals (educators and non-educators) and in organizations of all types.

However, although research is slowly emerging that identifies specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that contribute to mentor effectiveness (Allen and Eby, 2011; Odell and Huling, 2004), the educational field has yet to develop research-based universally agreed upon “best practices” in mentoring. We propose that this is due largely to the complexity of both the practice of mentoring and the term “best practices.” The purpose of this paper is to delve into these two issues, within the context of education and propose a course of action to deal with these complexities.

We begin by describing the breadth of the field of mentoring in education. This is followed by a review of the complexity of the term “best practices.” We then suggest a way to clarify this term in order to initiate a process that would enable researchers to identify best practices that span educational contexts.

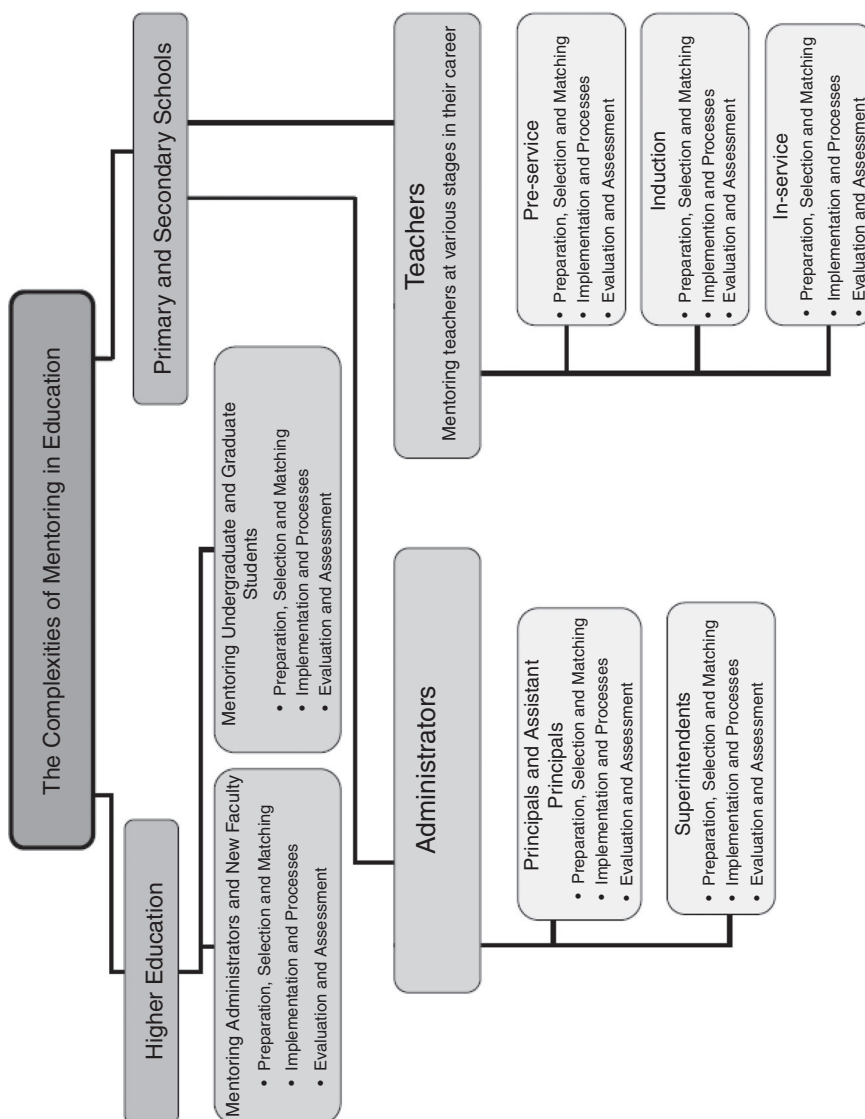
### **The complexity of mentoring**

Best practices in mentoring are difficult to identify due partially to the complexity of the mentoring process. This complexity is related to the context of mentoring, which in turn impacts its definition, and the way in which it is conceptualized. These complexities are described in detail in the sections that follow. Although we attempt to focus our sources on mentoring literature in education, at times we incorporate literature from other fields as it provides background and context.

#### *Mentoring context, roles, and conceptualizations*

Mentoring can be found in almost every professional context. Each context has its own unique characteristics influencing the mentoring that occurs (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2007; Kochan, 2002; Mullen, 2012). Mentoring programs are offered to individuals of all ages and to meet a wide variety of purposes in and across many professions. For example, many community and governmental agencies use it to foster personal and professional growth. Mentoring in business and industry has become a common practice as a strategy for recruiting, retaining, and promoting high potential talent (Eddy *et al.*, 2001). Schools of medicine and nursing implement mentoring programs to enhance individuals’ socialization into the profession (Grossman, 2013).

Within education, mentoring occurs in multiple contexts and levels (see Figure 1). For example, in higher education contexts, new faculty members often receive mentoring support; undergraduates and graduate students, particularly those from under-represented groups, are frequently invited to participate in mentoring programs; and there are numerous programs focussed on providing experienced faculty members opportunities to be mentored into administrative roles. In primary and secondary schools, mentoring is often used to induct, develop and retain teachers, and administrators. Mentoring programs are also often available to meet varied student needs at all levels of study. These programs differ not only in terms of location and structure, but also in relation to their purposes, the roles mentor and mentee play and when and how the mentoring occurs. For example, pre-service teachers are mentored when engaging in their field placements; newly employed teachers are often inducted into the profession with assigned mentors when they assume their teaching positions, and veteran teachers can receive on-going support at any point in their careers (Achinstein and Athanases, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001a). In the administrative realm, it is likely that new assistant principals, senior principals, and new and senior superintendents would receive mentoring for different needs and purposes. Although programs may have similar



**Figure 1.**  
The complexities  
of mentoring

foci and serve similar groups, even in these sub-contexts within education, organizational cultural differences exist related to the purposes of mentoring, some intentional and some unintentional, as documented by Kochan and Pascarelli (2003)

The complexity of mentoring in education is also reflected by the many terms used for “mentor,” as well as for those used to describe the person being mentored (see Table I). For example, several terms are used in the present-day literature to characterize mentors of beginning teachers and each indicates different underlying assumptions and expectations. The most common term is “supervisor” or “university supervisor” (Slick, 1998), which is derived from the Medieval Latin word *supervidue* “meaning to ‘look over and oversee’” (Slick, 1998, p. 821). Some researchers have proposed alternative terms that characterize the supportive nature of the role, like “advisor” or “helper” (Stone, 1987, p. 71). Others have used the language of coaching, evoking images of athletic coaches or, more recently, life coaches – individuals who often work one-on-one and who are in charge of training or teaching. Terms like “field instructor” (Denyer, 1997) and “university-based teacher educator” (Millwater and Yarrow, 1997) imply responsibilities and actions that are more educative in nature (Feiman-Nemser, 2001b). Denyer (1997, p. 39) views the word “instructor” as key, since it encompasses the heart of the role – “a person who will engage in instruction in the field, a person who will teach [...] teacher candidates about teaching, a person who will learn from teaching.” It is particularly interesting to note that each term carries its own connotation and reflects how mentoring relationships might be conceptualized and enacted.

The multiple mentoring terms used reflect understandings of what a mentor is and what he/she is expected to do. Put another way, not everyone in education shares the same paradigms regarding mentoring. Some scholars view teaching as a practice to be learned over time and a term like “novice,” which means learner or beginner, best fits their developmental conceptualization of the mentee. In this conceptualization, the mentor is someone who helps teachers develop their practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001a). Mentoring, in this case, “moves beyond emotional support and brief technical advice to become truly educative, focused on learning opportunities that move novices’ practice forward and challenge their thinking and practice” (Achinstein and Athanases, 2006, p. 9). However, when a mentee is labeled as a protégé, the relationship carries very different connotations. Blackwell (1989, p. 9) describes this mentoring as “a process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as protégés.” Here the mentor would appear to be someone who is more directive with the mentee. There is a hierarchical nature to their

Terms used for those mentoring		Terms used for those being mentored
Mentor	Teacher	Protégé
Sponsor	Coach	Mentee
Friend	Ally	Novice
Advisor	Preceptor	Coachee
Developer	Counselor	Preceptee
Tutor	Supervisor	Apprentice
University supervisor	Field supervisor	Beginning teacher
Liaison		Student teacher
Cooperating teacher		Intern
Supervising teacher		

**Table I.**  
Mentoring terms

relationship, for it is the mentor who holds the knowledge and power, while the mentee is expected to emulate the mentor. The purpose of this type of mentoring is to transmit knowledge and skills to someone with less experience and expertise, in order to help them assimilate into a new role. Table II provides an overview of mentoring terms and the relationships they imply. While this list is far from comprehensive, it illustrates the fact that mentoring is conceptualized and enacted in very different ways for different purposes. As a way to think about the various conceptualizations of mentoring, we draw upon Kochan and Pascarelli's (2012) framework that describes the purposes and methods of mentoring as traditional, transitional, or transformational, meaning that they range from maintaining the status quo in the educational organization (traditional) to moving toward or achieving change and innovation (transformative). It should also be noted that although Table II disaggregates various mentoring paradigms, we realize that in the course of their work, mentors may use multiple paradigms, depending on the needs of the mentee.

#### *Alternate forms of mentoring and diverse cultures*

In addition to roles and conceptualizations of the mentoring relationships, the way in which mentoring relationships are structured and the cultural understandings about their purposes differ, creating another issue when attempting to identify which practices are best. The traditional form of mentoring described by Kram (1985) was based on a mentoring dyad, in which one mentor was paired with one protégé. The traditional form of mentoring involves the transfer of skills within authoritative and apprenticeship contexts and is male-based in its origins. In more recent mentoring literature, the concept of a developmental network of mentors has been explored (Higgins and Kram, 2001), which is referred to as a mentoring "constellation" (Higgins and Thomas, 2001), or a mentoring "mosaic" (Mullen, 2005). Other structures and hybrid forms of mentoring are also emerging, such as mentoring as a developmental learning partnership (Mullen and Lick, 1999; Zachary, 2012), peer-mentoring, e-mentoring, mentoring circles (Kram and Ragins, 2007), cascade mentoring (Davis *et al.*, 1996), reverse mentoring (Scandura and Viator, 1994), and synergistic co-mentoring (Mullen and Lick, 1999).

Further complicating the issue of complexity in mentoring is that these forms and types of mentoring vary culturally (O'Neill and Blake-Beard, 2002; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2006; Ragins, 2007). This cultural diversity demands that organizations identify ways to support mentoring relationships among people from different cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. Blake-Beard *et al.* (2007, p. 225) acknowledge that "the impact of race on mentoring relationships is an important question to raise, first and foremost because the changing composition of the workforce means that individuals will experience more cross-race (and cross-cultural) interactions within organizations of today and tomorrow." Ragins (2007) concurs, stating that diversity characterizes most aspects of organizational life, but he goes beyond race to include diversity in age, sexual orientation, religion, gender, disability, and economic class.

An additional challenge in exploring mentoring in an international arena is that alternative models of mentoring may be used in different countries. For example, Clutterbuck (2007) notes that the European mentoring model is mainly non-directive; whereas, the American model has several aspects of directedness, such as sponsorship, networking, or career outcomes. The concepts of mutuality and reciprocity in the mentoring relationship have long been accepted processes in European mentoring, but have only recently begun to take hold in the USA (Kram and Ragins, 2007). Sontag *et al.* (2007) discovered that managers in Spain would not allow cross-gender partnerships, and

**Table II.**  
Mentoring paradigms

<p><i>Traditional mentoring paradigms</i> Involves the transfer of skills within authoritative and apprenticeship contexts; traditionally male-based in its origins; status quo culture, values transmitted</p> <p><i>Support</i> (Ballantyne et al., 1995) The purpose is to emotionally and logistically support novices to help them survive the first years on the job. Retention is a goal of this type of mentoring</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Buddy Friend Advisor Counselor</p>	<p><i>Transitional mentoring paradigms</i> Mentor and protégé are partners, co-learners; mentor is guide, supporter. Cultural gaps are bridged and cultural differences honored</p> <p><i>Instruct</i> (Denyer, 1997) The purpose is to help novices learn about their practice. The mentor uses various stances and strategies, depending on the situation, like teaching directly and asking probing questions. Together they plan, teach, and analyze practice</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Instructor Teacher Field instructor</p>	<p><i>Transformative mentoring paradigms</i> Mentor and protégé are engaged in creativity, discover, innovation; mentor and protégé roles are fluid and changing; new realities are created as they engage in collective action to transform the organization</p> <p><i>Inquire</i> (Feiman-Nemser, 2001b) The purpose of this type of mentoring is joint-inquiry into real issues of practice. The mentor and novice analyze artifacts of practice as a way to think about the work, learn from one another, and plan next steps</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Co-learner Field instructor</p>
<p><i>Supervise</i> (Borko and Mayfield, 1995) The purpose of this type of mentoring is oversight and therefore there is a hierarchical nature to the relationship. The goal is to make sure that the novice does what is required</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Supervisor Field supervisor Sponsor</p>	<p><i>Reflect</i> (Schön, 1987) The purpose is to help novices adopt reflective habits by giving them opportunities for reflection. The goal of reflection is to help them analyze their practice – both successes and challenges – as a means to improve</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Facilitator</p>	<p><i>Guide</i> (Blackwell, 1989) The purpose is to help novices improve by identifying weaknesses and offering suggestions. This often involves ‘putting out fires’ and fixing immediate problems</p> <p><i>Terms:</i> Coach More knowledgeable other Tutor</p>

**Source:** Adapted from Kochan and Pascarelli (2012); Mullen (2012); Zachary (2012)

executives in France viewed formal mentoring as a process of remediation for employees. Manwa and Manwa (2007) and Geber and Nyanjom (2009) pointed to the African concept of mentoring which focusses on community and connectedness and suggested that traditional western concepts of mentoring may not fit this cultural value. These varying perspectives may mean that mentoring best practices could differ between countries.

### *Challenges associated with defining mentoring*

Variations in forms and contexts make defining mentoring a challenge, which becomes initially apparent by the number of terms used to describe the participants in the mentoring relationship previously noted (see Table I). There is also a lack of a universal definition of the term mentoring (Crow, 2012; Eby *et al.*, 2010). While Dominguez's (2012) review of a large database of mentoring articles found that most used either Kram's (1985) definition or that proposed by Levinson *et al.* (1978), Crisp and Cruz (2009) found more than 50 definitions of mentoring when examining just the social science literature. Definitions of mentoring denote a variety of components. Some definitions describe the people (mentors or mentees), some describe behaviors and others describe mentoring processes. Traditionally, mentoring has been defined as a relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé's career (Kram, 1985). This definition describes the people involved and the purpose, and a definite hierarchical relationship. In sharp contrast, Zachary (2005) defined mentoring as reciprocal and collaborative learning between two or more individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for helping a mentee work toward achievement of clear and mutually defined learning goals. This definition describes the people involved and the purpose, but a very different nature of the relationship (mutual, reciprocal).

Crow (2012) noted that defining mentoring is problematic in the following ways: historically, the definitions have described mentoring attributes rather than the meaning of the concept; the expanding types of mentoring have moved the field away from the traditional mentoring dyad concept; the boundaries of the concept have become blurred with other supportive roles; and assumptions about the goals of a mentoring relationship have been largely unexamined. Crow (2012) also pointed out that the lack of a solid mentoring definition limits the ability to develop theories of mentoring, as well as making it difficult to build a research base in the field.

In addition to the ambiguity of mentoring definitions, the terms "coaching" and "mentoring" are often used interchangeably in educational contexts (Fletcher and Mullen, 2012). Some scholars contend that these terms are different in several respects, and should be researched separately (Clutterbuck, 2007; Feldman and Lankau, 2005). Clutterbuck (2007, p. 645) clarified this by stating that coaching can be either directive or non-directive, but is focussed on performance goals, specific tasks, or competencies, while mentoring is "concerned with helping people achieve longer-term career or other personal goals." Fletcher and Mullen (2012, p. 2) sought to bring the terms "mentoring" and "coaching" together with the following perspective: "We recognise that mentoring and coaching theory are not simple or uniform concepts but complex educational ideas that inevitably change because of their contextual dependency, philosophical rootedness and political idiosyncrasies."

Clearly, the wide range of mentoring contexts, concepts, and definitions has made synthesis difficult and the mentoring literature has been "disparate and fragmented, having been the product of several disciplines, each with a unique orientation" (Savickas, 2007, p. xvii).

### The complexity of “best practices”

Another complexity in defining best practice in mentoring is trying to determine what the term “best practices” means. The term “best practices” has been used in management (Francis and Holloway, 2007), computer software development (Ambler and Lines, 2012), and health care (Frampton and Charmel, 2008) to describe practices that “work” and have consistently been shown to be superior. Across the disciplines, best practices are described as an amalgamation of practice and research, meaning they are both useful and tested in practice yet firmly rooted in current, rigorous research. In other words, they are practices that are “solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field” (Zemelman *et al.*, 1998, p. viii). Despite this commonality, there are different conceptualizations of best practices (see Figure 2).

Some disciplines use the term “best practices” to standardize the field, offering prescribed methods or pre-made templates for people to follow or a framework outlining an array of appropriate practices (Francis and Holloway, 2007). This standardization becomes problematic when best practices are reduced to a list from which practitioners can pick and choose, because a fixed list ignores the fact that best practices are by nature fluid and ever-changing, as new research emerges. Lists of best practices also often fail to account for the contextual nature of practice as not every practice is appropriate for every context, nor are they implemented the same way every time.

Some disciplines take a more rigorous stance in determining what makes a best practice and suggesting that people use it. The US Department of Health and Human Services (2003), for example, stipulates that there must be evidence of effectiveness and generalizability in order for something to be considered a best practice. We believe this to be a more viable definition of best practices than creating a list of things to do, because by their very nature, best practices imply a measure of quality, meaning that they make work more effective by utilizing “the latest knowledge, technology, and procedures” (Zemelman *et al.*, 1998, p. viii).

In education, the notion of best practices gained widespread appeal in the late 1990s with the advent of the standards movement (Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Zemelman *et al.*, 1998). A growing body of practitioner-friendly literature now provides teachers with empirically based instructional frameworks and strategies to improve their teaching (Marzano, 2007; Zemelman *et al.*, 1998).



Figure 2.  
Best practices



While there is a set of empirically based International Standards for Mentoring Programs in Employment (2004), and an assessment process to identify the degree to which these standards have been applied in a particular situation, the mentoring literature in education has been slow to develop in terms of creating standards and best practices in mentoring. Despite the many how-to manuals available for mentors, most of the information within them is anecdotal in nature (Barnett and O'Mahony, 2008; Crow, 2012). In fact, one of the major criticisms leveled against "best practices" in education is that many of the examples found in practitioner-oriented literature are unsubstantiated by research, and in many cases, merely describe the latest fads or fashions (Francis and Holloway, 2007).

There are several factors that might explain this lack of empirically substantiated mentoring best practices in education. As a relatively new practice in education, mentoring is in the theory-building phase, where researchers are beginning to describe what is happening in the field, such as the roles that mentors play and the knowledge, practices, and skills that they use in their work with novices.

Another factor has to do with the nature of mentoring research itself. Most studies that examine mentoring in education are small-scale, qualitative studies (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Levine, 2006). While these cases help to identify promising practices, they do not allow generalization across mentoring contexts. Yet another challenge is that the research in various mentoring contexts is uneven. For instance, the preponderance of research on mentoring in education is in the area of teacher mentoring, with much less on school administrator mentoring and mentoring in higher education (Dominguez, 2012).

The field is beginning to build a body of evidence that supports the effectiveness of mentoring, but in this age of accountability, there needs to be greater substantiation about how effective mentoring is created, implemented, and evaluated. It is time to begin to develop an organized, focussed approach to identify program structures and processes and what mentors and mentees must know and be able to do that lead to more effective and successful students, teachers, administrators, or faculty within varied educational contexts.

### **Identifying mentoring best practices in education**

As we have detailed, the complexity of both the practice of mentoring and the term "best practices" make it difficult to draw broad conclusions on what is working well in mentoring in education based on research. However, we are optimistic that as a field, we can begin to engage in a process that will help us empirically identify these practices. We offer two strategies that we believe will assist in this process: define best practices and engage and synthesize collaborative research within and across educational contexts.

#### *Define best practices*

The first step in identifying best practices in mentoring in educational environments involves developing an operational definition of best practices. This will enable the field to describe effective practices in education mentoring that can also be empirically substantiated. In order for a practice to qualify as a best practice, we propose that it must meet all of the following criteria:

- be effective in practice;
- be empirically proven; and
- achieve the stated purpose.

The challenge becomes knowing how to identify each of these characteristics. The following descriptions offer concrete ways to think about each of them (see Figure 3).

*Effectiveness in practice.* Consideration should only be given to those practices that are regularly and effectively being used by practitioners in the field. To qualify, these practices must be attainable, accessible, and affordable. Attainable means that the practice is feasible and not so complicated that it is impractical. For example, suggesting that mentors observe their mentees daily might be productive, but is not a viable option for most people and would therefore be considered unattainable. Accessible means that it is virtually universally possible and not so extreme as to exclude certain groups. For example, online resources that require a subscription may not be available to all districts or universities and therefore would be ineligible for consideration as a best practice. Finally, best practice must be affordable. Suggesting that schools hire full-release mentors to support administrators or teachers, for example, is unrealistic for most districts and therefore could not be considered a best practice.

*Empirically based.* As previously stated, much of the mentoring literature is based on anecdotal observations by an individual, or promoting a “how to mentor” practice that may not be tested in multiple educational settings. To be considered exemplary, a practice must be empirically substantiated in research-based literature – reputable, international peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books containing reports of sound research that have been conducted according to widely accepted methodologies, or dissertation research conducted under scrutiny of an institutional review board. It will be important to look for and develop both quantitative and qualitative studies that are broader in scope than isolated case studies or individual observations. Grounding practices in research will also help to ensure that they are conceptually founded and not based solely on practitioner experiences.

*Achieve its stated purpose.* To be considered a best practice, a practice must demonstrate that it is effective in reaching its goals. Campbell *et al.* (2003, p. 354) offer a definition of effectiveness – “that which produces, or is certain to produce, the intended effect.” Therefore, a practice would need to demonstrate that it produced its intended effect. For instance, one of the primary purposes of mentoring in education is to increase effectiveness by creating highly effectual faculty members, administrators, and teachers (Casavant and Cherkowski, 2001; Fairbanks *et al.*, 2000).



Figure 3.  
Determining best practices

Therefore, mentoring practices that reach this goal would be eligible for consideration as best practices. One would look for evidence of effectiveness and then examine the practices that created success. For example, if a mentoring practice claimed that it increased retention among new faculty members, then there would need to be corollary data that substantiated this claim before one could claim that structures and activities that were used are indeed best practices.

### *Synthesize across contexts*

The previous section provided a conceptual framework to aid in the identification of best practices in education mentoring. We believe that in order to make claims from the literature about what we know, what we still need to learn, what is being done well and what needs to improve in mentoring, each specific area (preparation/selection/matching; implementation/processes; evaluation/assessment) in each context (higher education, teacher education, and educational leadership) needs to be analyzed separately for best practices used in that context (see Figure 1). This enormous task will require a coordinated effort. One way to accomplish this might be to conduct a collaborative literature review, in which scholars from within each context engage in the process of categorizing practices that are working in their field, using shared, previously agreed upon parameters (i.e. key words, search engines, best practices criteria). We believe it is critical to bring together a team of researchers from the various contexts (teacher education, educational leadership, and higher education) for this task, as each context draws upon its own seminal literature, theoretical frameworks, and publication sources.

The next step would involve cross-case analyses, wherein researchers – perhaps the coordinators of the collaborative literature review – determine if there are practices that seem to be effective across contexts. We suspect that some practices will be common across contexts, while others may be more uniquely suited to their specific group. Identifying common practices found in multiple contexts will allow us, as a field, to specify standards that can be used broadly by practitioners. Looking across contexts will also provide opportunities for researchers and practitioners alike to learn from one another. Perhaps most importantly, we believe that this exercise can provide another way for those of us who work in mentoring to evaluate what we do, in order to determine whether our practices are empirically grounded. This cross-contextual lens may help us consider questions such as: Are the mentoring practices used in our area substantiated by research? Are any common practices counter-productive or in need of alteration? Are there practices that still need to be empirically investigated? By engaging in this process, we can begin to build a common body of knowledge about effective mentoring that will allow us to respond concretely to critics and to substantiate our belief that mentoring works. This exercise also has the potential to contribute significantly by identifying gaps in the literature on mentoring, thereby indicating what future research needs to be conducted.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the complexities related to identifying mentoring best practices in education, and to suggest how researchers might begin to engage in identifying mentoring best practices across educational contexts. Education is a practitioner-based field and as such, the notion of best practices has wide appeal. Caution is warranted, however, when these practices are unsubstantiated by research. There has long been a tension in the field of education between practice and theory,

resulting in compartmentalized knowledge (Britzman, 2003; Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1985). Dewey (1904/1965, p. 320) went so far as to call this dualism “one of the chief evils of the teaching profession.” With the growing interest in best practices, the time is ripe in education for a melding of theory and practice, to think not only about the “how-to,” but also to provide the empirical support for specific strategies and behaviors that make mentoring effective. The ideas proposed in this paper should assist those interested in creating a conceptual framework of best practices in mentoring in education, for there is a desperate need to “figure out “what counts” amidst the glorious complexity of practice, and how to characterize it in careful ways” (Schoenfeld, 1999, p. 12). Using a standard definition of best practice and engaging in efforts such as collaborative literature reviews, will help create a body of knowledge about what constitutes “serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art” (Zemelman *et al.*, 1998, p. viii) practices and will provide us with a better understanding of what is known and what remains to be investigated.

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