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The Importance of Mentoring for Heads and Teachers of Preschool Educational Organizations

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Abstract

The aim of the work is to substantiate theoretically and identify experimentally the attitude of the heads of preschool educational organizations, as well as teachers working in them, to mentoring in theory and practice and to determine the range of professionally significant competencies necessary for specialists in the field of preschool education. The research method is the author's questionnaire, which is an express questionnaire to identify the focus of the heads of preschool organizations on mentoring activities for mentees. The main research method is a theoretical analysis of domestic and foreign sources on the introduction of mentoring in a preschool organization. The respondents assumed success and achievement of the educational goals in the preschool educational organization. 68 % of respondents think about the positive interaction between a mentor and a mentee, while the remaining 32 % prepare for the assigned tasks, and how the relationship develops is irrelevant. "This is work that needs to be done" – this quote supported the arguments of 32 % of respondents. The result of the study is the identification of the attitude of mentors and mentees to mentoring activities, as well as the definition of professionally significant competencies for a preschool organization. This study can be used in the preschool education system by both heads and mentees, as well as students – future teachers.

Keywords: mentoring, mentor, leadership competencies, mentee competencies, mentee-teacher.

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Introduction

The trend in the development of the scientific foundations of mentoring is due to the strategic goal of the world community of the 21st century. It focused on improving the quality of educational policy, which requires a radical change in approaches to the management of an educational organization. These and other areas are reflected in the state program "Development of Education" (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of December 26, 2017 No. 1642), Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of May 7, 2018. No. 204 "On national goals and strategic objectives of the development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2024", Forecast of the long-term socio-economic development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030. The purpose of the study is to develop the scientific foundations of mentoring with assertiveness factors for a preschool educational organization (for this, monitoring and an express survey of leaders of preschool educational organizations will be carried out).

Fundamental transformation in preschool education is inevitable. At the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE) they touched upon the topic of transforming technologies for the management of a preschool educational organization for the greater use of teachers' professional resources. It leads to the conclusion that the professional competencies of preschool leaders require improvement.

The relevance of the study is also driven by the need to choose a development path for mentors and mentees, while also determining the diversity of mentoring in its manifestations:

– Mentoring in preschool is always a joint journey between the mentor and mentee to achieve the desired outcome, with developmental trajectories for both defined (Gemmerlin & Belyakova, 2010).

– The mentor possesses the resources necessary for the mentee-teacher's development: experience, knowledge, skills, network, worldview, and much more; the mentee possesses a "new" perspective when addressing various situations (Welton et al., 2014).

– Mentoring fosters a special relationship between the mentor and mentee-teacher, aimed at achieving shared goals. Mentoring is based on mutual respect, trust, sincerity, and empathy. At the same time, it is generally accepted that manifestations of a directive management style and the desire to resolve a problematic situation instead of a mentor are unacceptable (Garifullina, 2022; Garifullina, 2024).

Purpose and objectives of the study

The main purpose is to study the attitude of the heads of preschool educational organizations, as well as teachers working in them, to mentoring activities and to identify the range of professionally significant competencies necessary for specialists in the field of preschool education. One of the objectives of the study was to examine the sample of respondents (mentors and mentee-teachers) and the professional competencies that influence the use of mentoring in preschool educational institutions. Another objective was to determine the attitudes of various preschool teachers and specialists toward the theory and practice of mentoring.

Literature review

While preparing the questionnaire, we were guided by domestic and foreign studies: the development of a mentor's leadership can be found in the studies of Golman (2007), Gemmerlin and Belyakova (2010), Zherebyaeva (2010); studies devoted to national-cultural and regional features in the development of mentors and their managerial culture - in the studies of domestic scientists Zakurdaeva and Chinareva (2010), Gagaev and Gagaev (2018), foreign - Doran (1981), Welton et al. (2014).

Some studies present models of corporate culture development that involve mentoring as a factor influencing the formation of relationships within the teaching staff – Kamenskaya (2014), Eremin (2017).

Mentoring involves one-on-one communication. But organizations often practice group mentoring, which is primarily due to a shortage of mentors. It is generally accepted that the best results are achieved if 3–8 people take part in group mentoring. This type is used when a preschool educational institution participates in international competitions. This way, there will be enough time to listen to everyone and study different points of view, and to prepare for presentations (for example, for the contest "The Best Educator of the Year") (Garifullina, 2024).

An innovative type of group mentoring is called "shadow rule". In fact, this is "a reality quest" in which a team of mentee teachers and the leaders receive the same package of documents necessary for making an important decision. In a few days, a team of mentee-teachers studies it, discusses, and expresses their views to a mentor or at a general meeting with the teaching staff. Thus, two significant goals are achieved:

- mentee-educators receive the skills of strategic thinking and leadership in action;
- management better understands how the teaching staff perceives their decisions.

If there is a need to help mentee teachers examine the problem from different angles, quick mentoring is often used. At the same time, a group of mentors works with a group of mentee-teachers according to the

principle of a "simultaneous game session": a pair of "mentor – mentee" communicates for a short time, then the partners change (Genao, 2016).

Mentoring exists in many areas of human life, yet its implications for preschool education remain underexplored. Our research confirms the lack of models and techniques for working with mentees in preschool educational institutions. Our attempts to integrate the scientific foundations of mentoring, as well as its theory and practice, into the preschool education system have proven successful.

Methodology

The methodological tools were: a questionnaire survey of respondents, namely mentors and their mentees - mentees and teachers, as well as an explanatory conversation for a more accurate interpretation of the answers received to assess personality and mental state.

We conducted a survey among 310 participants. There were 78 heads of preschool educational organizations and 232 senior teachers. The following regions took part in the study: Orenbursk region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Perm Territory, Yaroslavl region, Vologda region, Kostroma region, Ivanovo region, Vladimirskaya region, Bryansk region, Voronezh region, Ryazan region.

Heads of preschool educational organizations were asked the following questions:

1. Have you heard any scientific theories behind mentoring?
2. What do you think is mentoring in the system of preschool education?
3. Are you a mentor?
4. How does traditional mentoring differ from modern mentoring?

Results

During the practical research, the survey revealed that the majority of respondents – 62 % – had not heard of mentoring. Twenty-seven percent admitted to having heard of it but had not practiced it. Eleven percent of respondents were familiar with scientific theories of mentoring.

During the theoretical study, as the second stage of the pedagogical experiment, based on the results of practical activities, it was decided to familiarize respondents with the basic terminology of the scientific foundations of mentoring and its implementation in the theory and practice of preschool educational organizations, with the aim of familiarizing them with the current problem.

The results obtained indicate that all subsequent questions posed to respondents confirmed each of them had a subjective opinion regarding mentoring in the preschool education system. Some respondents agreed that mentoring has, unfortunately, been lost. Others responded that even "introducing" the scientific foundations of mentoring into the preschool education system would not change anything, as there is a certain group of people who are not prepared to change in the conditions of the "new" world (presumably, the globalization of the educational space). There were also leaders who openly considered mentoring a "sacrifice" they were unwilling to make for the sake of their teachers.

What do you think is mentoring in the system of preschool education?

- An effective way to manage an educational organization
- Hidden method of directive control
- Interest in modern technologies
- Finding the best ways to interact with the teaching staff
- Willingness to change not only for the sake of the educational organization, but also for yourself - first of all
- Something new in education
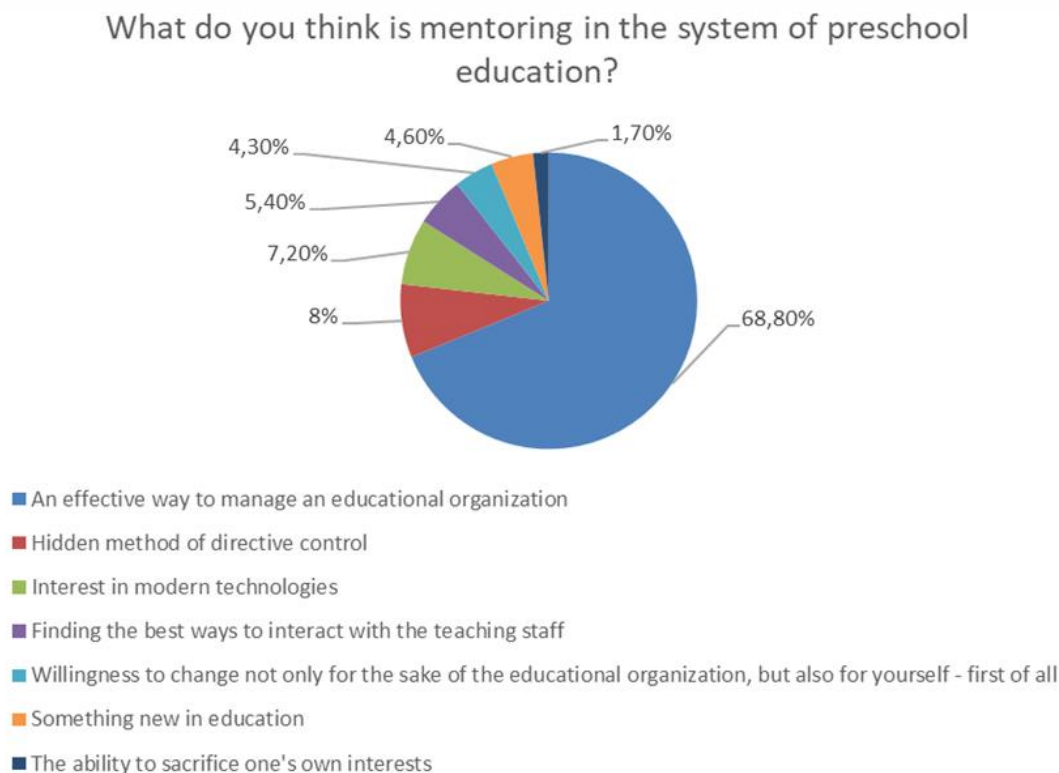- The ability to sacrifice one's own interests

Figure 1. Review of leaders' answers to the question: "What do you think
is mentoring in the system of preschool education?"

The majority of respondents, both mentors and mentee-teachers, note that mentoring is an effective model of interaction with people in both horizontal and vertical contexts. The conclusion is clear: the sooner preschool leaders recognize that mentoring is a tool that changes depending on the context of team management, the more effective and productive this interaction will be. More than half of respondents believe that individualizing relationships, taking into account each person's preferences, is aimed at strengthening team cohesion in the preschool. Personal motivations foster proactivity rather than a static state in which responsibility is shifted and the desire to work gradually fades. Less than 25 % of respondents acknowledge that independent adaptation of the scientific foundations of mentoring by management within the context of

the educational institution allows for changes in methods of interaction and information transfer, and also strengthens the individuality of each student. Mentoring also counteracts conformism and supports the self-worth of each mentee as part of a larger structure.

Those who expressed interest in modern and new technologies responded that they were quite willing to devote time and resources to training in the scientific foundations of mentoring and integrating it into the theory and practice of kindergarten work. They also noted the need to develop new skills for working with beginning teachers and those with a long history in the education system. And that so-called "soft" skills require regular updating given the rapidly changing world. Respondents with answers that mentoring is "... something new in education" are leaders who believe that bureaucratic workload does not allow learning something new, such as mentoring in preschool organizations, and that is why they refuse to understand the suggested topic.

Our research conducted from 2019 to 2025 confirms that all respondents had significant experience working in preschool educational institutions. The average age of our respondents was 35+. This is the most active working age, when readiness for change and transformation is high, and the desire for change is relatively easy to realize. The figure below shows examples of respondents' responses.

What is the difference between traditional mentoring and modern mentoring?

- ■ "Nothing"
- ■ "Everything new is well forgotten old"
- ■ "Successful "hit" of the word in time"
- ■ "Positivity of perception"
- ■ "Structure and Democracy"
- ■ "Strategy for the development of personality in a team"
- ■ "The predominance of partnership in labor relations"
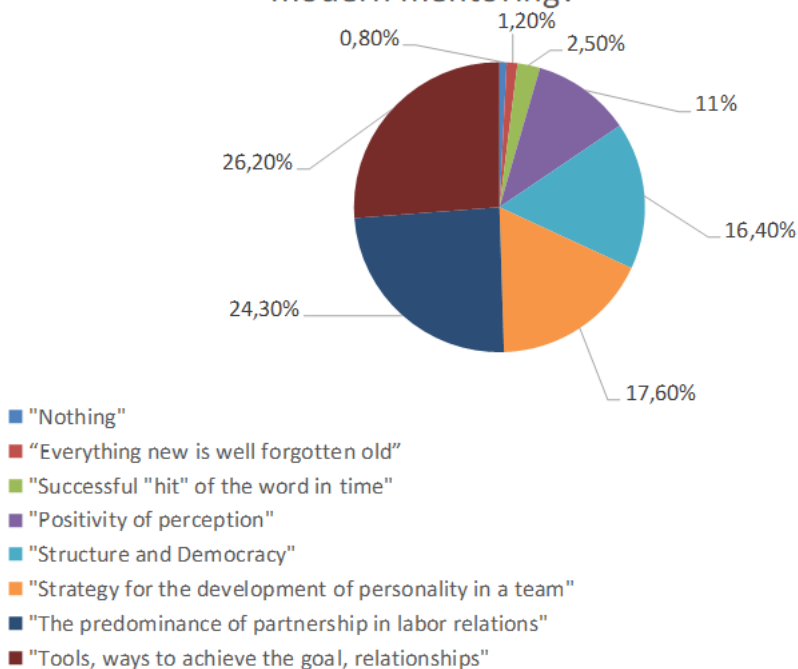- ■ "Tools, ways to achieve the goal, relationships"

Figure 2. Managers' answers to the question: "What is the difference between traditional mentoring and modern mentoring?"

According to the respondents (over 40 years old), a high level of workload and / or simply burnout in the workplace has an effect on them, for example, this implies a reluctance to study new aspects of pedagogical activity. Their answers included "Nothing", "Everything new is well forgotten old", "Successful "hit" of the word in time".

Our study results demonstrate that mentoring is chosen by those who are open to change. Most respondents cited mentoring as a way to build positive relationships, noting its particular benefit in the context of interactions between a leader and a mentee in a preschool.

After conducting an express survey, the heads of preschool educational organizations were given 20 competency templates and were asked to generate the 5 most significant and relevant for the development of assertiveness in mentoring.
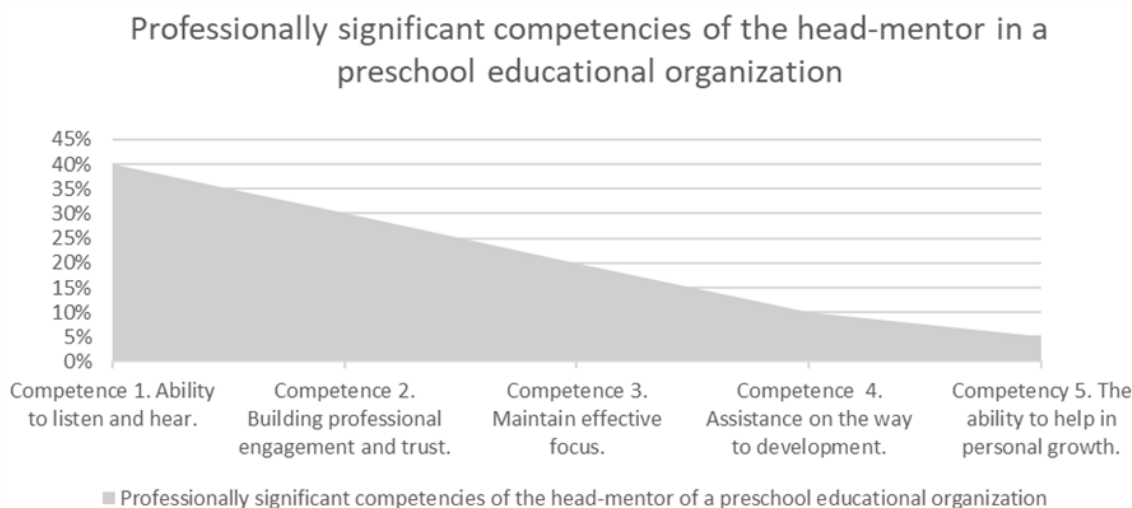

Figure 3. Professionally significant competencies in mentoring

Competence 1. Ability to listen and hear

The key and most important competency is not simply listening to mentees but also hearing them, as these are similar but not identical concepts. The beauty of this competency is that it can be cultivated: to do so, a mentor simply needs to be genuinely interested in the mentee and demonstrate a genuine interest in their work. In addition to listening skills, there's also a component of empathy, which allows one to sense the mood of others, which is crucial in building relationships. It is important to pay attention to your mentee educator, listen with the intent to understand and help solve their problems (Kovi, 2018; Zakurdaeva & Chinareva, 2010).

Intention in a conversation can slip away and change the vector. Dialogue and communication with a mentee are considered successful when the mentor avoids the urge to "give advice" or simply take matters into their own hands and make decisions under their control. Constructiveness lies in the mentee's own decision-making, without the mentor's influence, but with their sensitive understanding of the situation. A thorough understanding of the issue and a non-intrusive approach to the mentee are crucial (Zherebyaeva, 2010).

There's a clear need to develop the ability to "listen and be heard"– it allows one to be present in the "here and now". Because of their heavy workload, managers sometimes fail to pay due attention to those who, in their daily work, face significant challenges that need to be addressed (Garifullina, 2022; Goulman et al., 2017).

Three organized stages of research on the "listening and hearing" competency revealed that more than half of respondents, or 73 %, were unable to concentrate on the problem at hand, constantly drifting off into other concerns and future routines, unable to be present "here and now." Only 19 % of respondents were able to fulfill this requirement, indicating a problem exists and needs to be addressed.

Respondents' intentions were tested in the second stage using the following question:

What do you intend to do now?

a) Suggest a solution to the supervised teacher's problem;

b) Demonstrate your point of view;

c) Convince the interlocutor or supervised teacher of something.

At the third stage, the heads of the preschool educational organization were asked to conduct an internal audit. At the end of the conversation, it was necessary to ask themselves:

How good a listener were you?

Is your intention effective, is your attention constant?

Did the conversation lead to a better understanding of the situation?

Did it help to strengthen the personal relationship with the mentee teacher?

Is the chosen topic of conversation useful for your interaction?

Is it possible that the result will lead to the adjustment of professional intentions?

Competence 2. Building professional engagement and trust

In order for mentoring to be successful, the mentee-teacher must have confidence in the mentor and be motivated to cooperate.

To establish trust, first of all, it is necessary to be as honest, open and impartial as possible. In practical terms, it is very useful to discuss the issue of confidentiality in advance, so the information will not "leak out" to the team.

Since trust is never one-sided, it makes sense to share information about your preferences and hobbies with the mentee-teacher. Mentee-teachers should see the mentor as a living person, therefore nothing human is strange to them. Talking about your mistakes and defeats, this is an experience that can be most useful for mentee-educators. Having learnt that the leader once managed to overcome failures, the mentee educator will be able to look at their own fears and barriers in a new way. It is important to always keep in mind the positive intention of the mentoring session.

At the same time, it is important to be interested in the likes and dislikes of the mentee-teachers, their views, desires, hobbies. This information will help to better understand the motives and "driving forces" of the mentee teacher. It is advisable to maintain feedback with the mentee teacher about the effectiveness of mentoring: do the meetings meet their expectations? Do they help in solving the pedagogical and professional tasks? (Doran, 1981; Garifullina, 2024).

Competence 3. Maintain effective focus

During the development of mentoring relationships, psychological and pedagogical case studies are used to achieve optimal mutual understanding. The mentor can share their own experiences and those of the mentees / educators around them, inviting them to independently explore their current issues. Once these issues are clarified, the tasks sometimes need to be adjusted to achieve the best possible outcome. This requires a mentor with extensive experience and knowledge. It is much more important that the mentor should focus on topics that the mentee-educator wants to work with. In the process of choosing the tasks, the mentor needs to monitor his/her motivation: the desire to support the mentee-teacher or the desire to do as you think? This is the boundary that should not be crossed, since the directive approach to mentoring is unacceptable. Direct advice or, moreover, guidelines in mentoring are undesirable, it is much more expedient

to replace them with some ideas for consideration by the mentee teacher. This will help to avoid rejection from the mentee-teachers (Kamenskaya, 2014; Kes, 2020).

Competence 4. Assistance on the way to development

The path to a young teacher's development is long and arduous. Young teachers who have completed their training don't always easily integrate into an established team. This is much easier in a new kindergarten, where each teacher develops in line with the growth and development of the preschool. However, other challenges arise: not every teacher is able to cope with the demands of the parent group, and not every teacher is able to find common ground with the mentor leader, other teachers, or mentees. It is precisely for such situations that a mentor is needed. They will help the teacher adapt to the preschool environment, as someone interested in the successor, with similar views and approaches.

Competency 5. The ability to help in personal growth

Professionalism, growing from the experience of preschool teachers, is the primary goal of a mentor-leader (Gagaev & Gagaev, 2018; Popov & Proskurovskaya, 2007). Professionalism reflects the mentee-teacher's versatility, breadth of perspective, and breadth of vision. Gradually, experience accumulates and knowledge is strengthened through practical work. At the same time, the mentor does not exert pressure or even influence the mentee-teacher's decision-making, but rather facilitates their rapid understanding of the environment and the appropriate decision-making.

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that a mentor is not the ultimate authority. However, their opinion is broader and more professional in terms of mentee-teacher development, as they draw on their own experience rather than theory gleaned from various sources. A mentor has the right to be subjective. They can also have their own opinions, which may differ from others, as does anyone. However, it is essential to maintain a loyal and flexible approach toward mentee-teachers in a preschool educational organization. Such an approach will foster a healthy psychological climate in the preschool education system and also have a supportive effect on the surrounding teachers and specialists. To this end, it is necessary to introduce the fundamentals of mentoring into preschool educational institutions.

Discussion

In our research, we found that mentees are sometimes unable to anticipate their own difficulties. Scientist Genao (2016) agrees with this statement. In this case, it is necessary to raise their awareness and gently challenge some of their views that deviate from an objective perspective. According to Kamenskaya (2014),

the mentor's job is to facilitate problem solving, not to solve it for the mentee. Western researchers such as Goulman et al. (2017) share this opinion, arguing that there is no universal method of assistance, but that an optimal solution can be found for each specific situation.

Our study was unable to fully identify the motivations that motivate respondents to answer questions in the particular way they did, nor was it able to fully explore the core competencies (with the exception of listening, as this competency is fundamental and without it, the development of other competencies is impossible). For example, it can be seen that the ability to facilitate personal growth (competency 5) plays a significant role in the development of assertiveness. Also, a key factor in mentoring is assistance along the development path (competency 4). In educational holdings (several educational organizations under a single management), the situation is the opposite. They do not prioritize promoting personal growth, as their efforts are focused on the development of the educational organization itself, rather than on the teachers they supervise. This occurs in new institutions just beginning their educational activities. Key competencies and factors associated with mentoring also confirm that this issue remains understudied. The limitations of the study are individual resources, in which it is possible to examine the differences in cultural and moral aspects, the observance of which is viewed differently by different representatives.
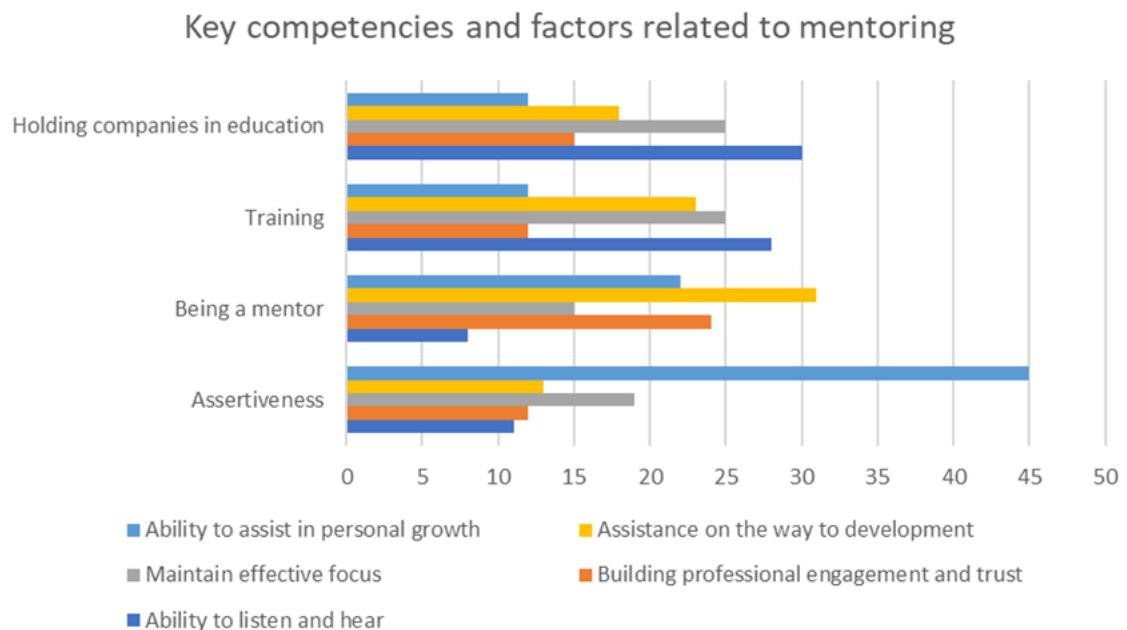

Figure 4. Key competencies and factors related to mentoring

The obtained results allow us to conclude that five professionally significant competencies of mentor-leaders and the attitudes of preschool mentees toward them have been identified, influencing the use of mentoring

in preschool educational institutions. Different attitudes toward mentoring between leaders and subordinates were identified: both negative and positive attitudes toward mentoring were examined. Respondents' responses, displayed in the study diagrams, are substantiated.

Conclusion

Mentoring is crucial for preschool leaders and teachers. Our research examined the attitudes of preschool leaders and teachers toward mentoring and identified five professionally significant competencies needed by preschool education professionals. Mentoring has been shown to be an effective approach to achieving educational goals. However, it is important to adhere to mentoring guidelines. Mentees can discuss their life events with their mentors, but the mentor's job is to keep their goals in mind and encourage their mentees to recognize them. Mentoring allows people to discover new, often completely unknown, sides of themselves and others. We found that mentoring in preschool education is a sincere desire to help other teachers develop. The mentor's goal is not to impress or delight the teacher-mentor. In mentoring, the focus is not on the mentor, but on the mentee. Establishing an effective personal connection with the mentee is the primary goal of a good mentor. In summary, our study revealed that reactions to mentoring in preschool education are subjective and depend on the respondent's position, professional focus, and even personality. For example, managers find new training more challenging than mentor teachers. Older teachers also find it more difficult to adapt to innovations and new trends, but their job responsibilities include not only self-training but also assistance and support for their mentored teachers. Mentees who are in the preschool education system for children under 3 years of age ("young professionals") are most easily integrated into this process. A desire to acquire new knowledge and a commitment to efficiency and effectiveness in their work influenced their perception of new information. Research in this area will be continued, as the monitoring conducted helped to define benchmarks for the application of scientific foundations for mentoring in Russian preschool education.

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