SOCIAL IMPACT IN PERSONALISED VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents exploratory research into an education-based virtual mentoring provision, the Virtual Professional Learning and Development (VPLD) program, and uses the Elements of Value Pyramid to help frame findings in a way that highlights the participants' (mentors' and mentees') perceived value of working together. Participants were educators and education leaders based within primary and secondary schools and kura in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on principles of phenomenology, the four authors/virtual mentors used self-study to unpack their "lived experience," and draw on previous case study data that focused on the VPLD program. By building on the benefits, while also working within the constraints, of the virtual environment, the mentors were able to adapt their mentoring skills and approaches to answer the questions, "Without the face-to-face collaborative, empathic, and full sensory human experience, how can virtual mentors be responsive to diversity among mentees?" and "What approaches support the raising of collaborative understandings, the recognition and acknowledgement of assumptions, the exploration of protocols, and the respectful engagement with the languages, cultures, and identities of self and others?" Findings, although related to virtual mentoring in the school sector, have relevance for higher education, especially aspects such as workload. Overall, the findings indicate that the culturally responsive, highly fluid approach of the mentoring partnership meant that participants felt they 1) participated in initiatives where they had a social impact, 2) had a strong sense of hope and belonging, 3) had access to people, skills, and strategies that helped increase their motivation and self actualization, and 4) had access to multiple professional and personal development pathways.

INTRODUCTION

What is a valuable professional learning and development (PLD) experience and how do we know? The notion of "value" is complex. We place on all the products and services we consume, including formal learning experiences, some aspect of intrinsic as well as perceived or intangible value. Therefore, understanding value is important to gain insights into the possible motivations of people when they make judgements about the value of a specific professional development provision or program.

Sutherland (2009) suggests that you can thrive "in a world where … intangible value constitutes a greater part of overall value" (video transcript). Building on this assertion, the Elements of Value Pyramid model (Almquist, Senior, & Bloch, 2016)—which is conceptually based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)—helps unpack the idea of intangible value further in part by addressing four kinds of human needs: functional, emotional, life changing, and social impact. Intangible value, as illustrated by the pyramid, can be enhanced because we perceive that a product or service has superior function, or it makes us feel good, or we see it as life-changing or as something that will help us have a social impact—or a combination of elements from all four.

In this article the authors present their research into the Virtual Professional Learning and Development (VPLD) program, an education-based virtual mentoring provision for educators (teachers/kaiako and leaders) within schools and kura in Aotearoa New Zealand. We use the Elements of Value Pyramid to help frame the findings in a way that highlights the perceived value of participating in the program to "make [value] … much less amorphous and mysterious" (Almquist, Senior,

& Bloch, 2016, Para. 44). In this way we hope to emphasize how the intangible values (especially cultural, functional, emotional, life-changing, and social-impacting) shaped participants' perceptions of their experiences of the VPLD program. Although the study was based in the school sector, finding, in particular around workload, the results are relevant to the higher education sector.

Context

The aim in 2009 was to develop a model of professional learning and development (PLD) that was scalable, sustainable, and replicable. The Ministry of Education wanted to offer educators in the school/kura sector an opportunity to learn by participating in virtual mentoring and an online Community of Practice. In the process, the project team hypothesized that participants' sense of self-efficacy would be more positive, and their professional practice would be enhanced. In turn, this may also have an influence on student well-being and achievement. Therefore, the VPLD program was designed to provide multiple ways for educators and leaders to participate in a way that would support them identify areas of professional growth based on their own needs and those of their students, school, and community (Author 1, 2012). The program had no formal "content," associated accredited institution, or formal assessment, and it was trialed with ten educators in 2010. The number of participants grew to 47 in 2016, having peaked at 56 in 2014.

During the application process to participate in the VPLD program, potential mentees provided information about their professional interests, experiences, and challenges, and this enabled a committee (comprising the virtual mentors in the project team) to identify "good fit" partnerships between mentors and mentees. While subject matter familiarity and experience in a particular role were desirable, the project team found that it was not essential; plus, the team made sure a covirtual mentor could be requested if specific discipline or role-knowledge was required. Mentees could participate in the program for three years. In the first two years they worked on their main professional development foci, and from 2013 onwards, in the third year, they had the option to transition into a Developing Virtual Mentor (DVM) role, which is described below.

VPLD mentors met online with their mentees once a month for approximately an hour. During the session, notes were typed into a Google document by both the mentor and the mentee. Mentoring strategies were customized, and foci could range from discussing pedagogy and learning theories to unpacking useful resources or working through the mentee's challenges, successes, and progress (Author 1, 2012). There was also the opportunity to engage in the VPLD online community of practice.

To meet the requests of mentees who signaled that they also wanted to become virtual mentors, in 2013 a program for developing virtual mentors (DVMs) was developed, and in 2014 the initiative was launched with 16 participants. To engage in the DVM program, an existing VPLD mentee applied, and if accepted, was partnered either with their own individual mentee or with a small group of mentees. At the same time, to build their own mentoring skills, the DVM continued to work with a mentor from the VPLD project team. Other support included using the virtual mentoring rubric (informed by the previous research into the VPLD program), an annual two-day, face-to-face DVM wananga (educational seminar) in January, access to a series of self-paced online modules, and a monthly webinar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is mentoring?

There is a combination of processes that lead to learning, which includes a person recalling, discussing, and making sense of their experiences (Freire, 1996) thereby transforming "them into knowledge, skill, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses …[to] integrate the outcomes into their own biographies" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 11). This process of recall and sense-making can be enhanced through mentoring, which is a relationship designed to accelerate an individual's growth and development, often over an extended period of time, thus enabling shifts in identity and values as well as in applied professional practice (Krishan, 2005). The relationship is negotiated between the mentor and mentee to facilitate diverse and personalized experiences and outcomes. The most successful mentoring relationships result in "a developmental alliance between equals in which one or more of those involved is enabled to: increase awareness, identify alternatives, initiate actions, and develop themselves" (Hay, 1995, p. 3).

In a developmental alliance, the mentee is given voice so that both the mentor and mentee became, as Stokes (2011) explained, more aware of shifts in perspectives and thinking, "eventually introducing conflict to promote self-examination and further development of alternative perspectives" (p. 8). Other factors Stokes identified as critical to the mentoring relationship were motivation, recognition and celebration of positive growth, and the provision of "a mirror… to extend the … [mentee's] self-awareness" (Daloz, 1986, in Stokes, 2011, p. 8). These factors help mentor and mentee watch for indications "that the relationship may be transformative and growth producing for both partners" (Stokes, 2011, p. 8).

Mentoring also fosters a sense of well-being, which can be defined as "the combination of feeling good and functioning well" (Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p. 264). A sense of well-being enhances professional learning and has a positive impact on student learning and well-being (Owen, 2016). The confidentiality and deep listening offered in mentoring partnerships helps create a safe space for educators and leaders to speak openly about their experiences, thoughts, and ideas so they feel "heard." This is particularly important for participants who feel unacknowledged, anxious, or challenged, or consider that their voice is not valued within their institution. In these cases, meaningful mentoring relationships, alongside participation in a community of practice, offer a sense of belonging and validation and increase the person's sense of self-efficacy (Roffey, 2012). As a result, the participant feels more resourceful and resilient and thus has an enhanced sense of well-being.

Within the VPLD program, mentoring was approached as a holistic process acknowledging the interface between professional and personal development, and most mentees were open to reflecting on, discussing, and challenging their thinking. Mentors offered nondirective support underpinned by qualities of empathy and cultural inclusivity, and together they worked towards aspirational outcomes.

What is Virtual Mentoring?

There are relatively few recent papers that look in depth at virtual mentoring (Boyce & Clutterbuck, 2011; Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010), and this paper aims to contribute to the existing knowledge base from an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective.

It is rare that a person, personally or professionally, does not communicate virtually with another person on a daily basis. Virtual mentoring (also known as distance mentoring, remote mentoring, tele-mentoring, cyber-mentoring, and eMentoring—Kasprisin, Single, Single, Muller, & Ferrier, 2008), uses digital technology to support "virtual face-to-face" connections from different geographic locations to help people grow their knowledge and skills (Ghods & Boyce, 2013). In turn, digital communication supports participants to overcome challenges to accessibility, particularly in terms of distance and time, through the use of synchronous tools (webinar, text chat, Skype, and phones) and asynchronous tools (email, discussion forums, blog posts, and comments on posts) (Owen, 2016).

The process of virtual mentoring maintains the essence of physically face-to-face mentoring in that it supports a discussion between two people working together for the purpose of professional and personal growth. One of the key benefits of virtual mentoring is the flexibility it offers. However, it should not be seen as the "poor cousin" of face-to-face mentoring or as a more cost-effective option. When these two factors drive a virtual mentoring initiative, it is likely to result in a relationship that is driven by needs of the institution rather than the learning or developmental requirements of the mentee (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). The tools do, however, require at least a novice level of digital literacy and a willingness to engage in online environments, meaning that additional support needs to be provided alongside the virtual mentoring.

Professional Learning: Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness can be described as the ability and willingness to learn from, and relate respectfully, with people of your own culture as well as those from other cultures (NCCRESt, n.d.). With professional learning provision, the development of culturally responsive practices therefore requires educators to form reciprocal learning relationships with diverse peoples and contexts. In the case of virtual mentoring this may seem challenging when the number and impact of usual cultural cues and protocols is reduced. Therefore, in a virtual mentoring environment it is necessary to develop a framework that has enough flexibility to enable the coconstruction of preferences and protocols in a

way that addresses some of, what may appear to be, its limitations. It is also an opportunity to consider further thinking around how different cultures embrace, interact in, and "own" online spaces.

In relation to overall responsiveness, a critical factor in virtual mentoring is the partnering of mentors with mentees. Simply assigning a mentor to a mentee is unlikely to result in a good relationship (Hook, Waaka, & Parehaereone Raumati, 2007). Consideration of "wairuatanga," for example, is important in bringing together mentees with appropriate mentors (Ratima & Grant, 2007).

RESEARCH METHOD

Through reflective accounts, meaning can be attributed to a person's lived experiences. However, it cannot be argued that "experiences have meaning. Meaning does not lie in the experience. Rather, those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively" (Schutz, 1967, p. 69). In this article the authors draw on principles of phenomenology and use self-study to unpack their "lived experience" from their own perspectives (Welman & Kruger, 1999). In this way, the authors seek to reflect on and identify their state of being and "doing," which has been changed by the new knowledge they encountered (Fromm, 1978).

The four participants in the study (all of whom are also the authors of this article) have worked closely together on the project in question, two since January 2010, and all four since January 2012. The participants each have been involved for 15 years or more with mentoring, facilitation, and educator professional development. Each mentor worked with between 8 and 25 mentees, depending on the number of hours they had allocated to mentor within the program.

Incorporating the principle of personal situated inquiry into reflective accounts (Samaras, 2011), the participants, in 2016, each separately wrote reflections about their experiences. This process involved describing their "inner lives," which has been described as "risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, and the abstract" (Palmer, 2007, p. 12). In keeping with a critical collaborative inquiry and a transparent and systematic research process (Samaras, 2011), the researchers first analyzed the four reflections independently to identify key emerging categories, before then cross-analyzing to synthesize codes and themes.

The participants have all been mentors in the VPLD and have a team role in the project. As such, there are a variety of different perspectives and insights into motivations, challenges, and professional development needs that may help inform innovation in professional learning and development. To help preserve some semblance of anonymity, quotes are attributed to Mentor 1, 2, 3, or 4.

Findings are also referred to from a research study of the VPLD program that has been conducted since its inception that focused on evaluating the efficacy of the design of the VPLD program. Every year since 2010 all (155) VPLD mentees were sent an invitation to participate in the research study along with information about the study and a consent form. We had a 100% return rate (after reminders were sent out), and an 85% agreement to participate. Participation was voluntary and there was no additional incentive offered to participate. Data were generated using a range of methods and tools that included:

- three online surveys per year (January, June, and November/December);
- recorded discussions and notes from virtual mentor meetings;
- ontributions from participants in all areas of the online community of practice (CoP);
- Webinar session recordings; and emails.

The case study method was used to aid understanding of a select subset as a distinct whole within its particular context (Merriam, 1998): in this case a professional development program that used a virtual mentoring approach to provide professional development for education practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand. Case studies are sometimes considered to be a qualitative technique, but they may use quantitative information (Yin, 2009), which was in keeping with the mixed methods used in this study. One drawback of the case study approach is a loss in breadth of generalizations about overall interrelation and effectiveness of processes and outcomes (Yin, 2009). To help address this, the authors plan to build on this initial case study by drawing on a larger participant group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the authors interweave data and

discussion to create a rich juxtaposition of findings and outcomes. The data collected were wide ranging so the authors have focused on virtual mentoring as opposed to mentoring in general, and they have tried to identify some of the key implications for someone who may also want to offer a virtual mentoring PLD provision. The Elements of Value Pyramid has been used to highlight how aspects of the virtual mentoring were perceived and valued by participants.

Mentoring Skills and Dispositions in a Virtual Environment

The VPLD team identified two questions that were central to how they approached mentoring in a virtual environment:

1) Without the face-to-face collaborative, empathic, and full sensory human experience, how can virtual mentors be responsive to diversity among mentees?

2) What approaches support the raising of collaborative understandings, the recognition and acknowledgement of assumptions, the exploration of protocols, and the respectful engagement with the languages, cultures, and identities of self and others?

The themes that emerged from the data included essential mentoring skills and dispositions. While many of them are the same, or similar to, those required in a face-to-face environment, the virtual environment required the skills to be adapted and refined—perhaps, at first, making the mentoring a little more demanding. All the virtual mentors, therefore, participated in formal and informal professional learning and sharing that included: "regular reflections that I use reflexively to shape my mentoring practice …. I also read, respond, and ponder in a number of online communities … [and] listen to education podcasts, as well as documentaries and podcasts that cover neuroscience, and psychology" (Mentor 4).

The skills and dispositions for virtual mentoring included:

● Empathy that considered the whole self and a person's well-being. Empathy helped build respectful, caring relationships based on honed intuition in order to nurture a relationship without physical presence or the use of all the senses. As empathic listeners, mentors trusted their intuition to recognize oral (and when the video was on, visual) cues within the virtual environment.

● Listening to "listen warmly, listen deeply, listen with compassion, listen with understanding, listen to question, listen to what they say, listen to what they don't say, listen to silence" (Mentor 1). Listening included "thinking about what … [my mentees] aren't saying, then using questioning and communicating strategies to … [support] mentees to arrive at [their own] realisations" (Mentor 3). Using summarising or paraphrasing that made "time stand still for a moment …. [to] create a pause … a silence … that helps a mentee test the fabric of their current reality and see it in a slightly different way" (Mentor 4). Within the virtual environment, summarizing and paraphrasing was a way of also checking understanding and perceptions while reflecting back to mentees.

● Compassion that was attuned with the wider impact on a mentee's life and aspects of being human in the world today supported by global awareness and online connectivity.

● Asking powerful questions without which "we may not conceive of ourselves, but are created by the process of deep listening and open mentoring conversations" (Mentor 4) that served to transform thinking, opened a mentee's mind to new opportunities, and furthered (and often consolidated) ways of knowing and being.

● Growing mindsets where there was "no place for judgment, assumptions, or intolerance, including about and of oneself" (Mentor 2), and where thoughtfulness and curiosity were encouraged.

● Laughing and celebrating as tools that helped relieve tension and encouraged engagement in mindful moments to revitalize or add positive energy.

● Engaging in rich conversations "for the purpose of someone else" (Mentor 1), that dug deeper into the "who, why, how, and so what" of an issue or topic.

● Cheerleading that celebrated successes and supported aspirations.

● Focusing on strengths-based discussions that acknowledged the best of the mentor and mentee and those with whom they worked and lived.

Successful mentoring relationships in the VPLD program were experienced most profoundly when there had been a good match between mentor and mentee. The VPLD team, therefore, aimed to responsively partner a mentor and a mentee based

on shared online initial introductions and early goal setting. The mentors all differed in their approaches to mentoring, so this approach required an understanding of the negotiated expectations of both mentee and mentor and the nature of the wairua of each. When the partnering was successful, the feedback spoke for itself: "Thank you … [for] the mentoring but more so for the relationship we have built between us. I feel like I have known you for many years and one thing that I do feel when we speak is your wairua and aroha which exudes from your presence…. Aroha tino nui ki a kōrua me tō hoa rangatira " (Mentor notes, 2015). In summary, careful attention to partnering, as well as the key skills of deep, nonjudgemental listening and open and powerful questioning, proved to be complementary and supported the development of virtual mentoring relationships.

Making Connections

Developing, growing, and maintaining connections in a virtual environment requires time, commitment, and confidence. The mentors made use of asynchronous and synchronous communication to facilitate the VPLD program. Asynchronous contact was mainly through emails, text, and the VPLD online CoP. One of the initial challenges with the online CoP was encouraging everyone to join and participate, and it took about two years to establish a thriving community. Once it was established, as Mentor 3 suggests, participants' involvement tended to fall into four categories:

1. The invisible: they do not go into the CoP at all, for a variety of reasons.

2. The stalker: those that go in and read or find what they want but don't leave a trail. (Not [overtly] contributing).

3. The visitor: These are the ones that will go in when invited and leave a comment or blog entry now and then.

4. The Resident: These people use the CoP as a tool for reflection, connection, and collaboration.

For all of the categories except number 1, the support offered by, and received from, the CoP was powerful with "a lot of peer support, empathy, offers of help, suggestions and I feel it's fantastic because this feels like ako (to both teach and to learn) … like reciprocity, manaakitanga (respect), whanaungatanga (relationships)" (Mentor 2). Heightened accessibility offered "opportunities for professional connectedness [which] maintain momentum and critical thinking, as well as surfacing new thinking and new challenges as we share our practice as mentors and mentees" (Mentor 2). There were also opportunities to "network with amazing talented people where you learn about the variety of skills and investigations" (Survey response, 2016).

One drawback identified with participating fully in the online CoP was time. Mentor 4 reflected that they would have liked "unlimited time to contribute to the online community, to learn new skills and practise my mentoring." This observation suggests that, for some mentors and mentees, the motivation was there, but there just weren't enough hours in the day.

Providing Access

Virtual mentoring provided greater flexibility and improved accessibility when compared with face-to-face mentoring. A feature of the VPLD program was that it offered mentors and mentees multiple ways to engage and make connections anytime and anywhere. During the monthly synchronous meetings notes were recorded (written) in real time, in a confidential shared Practitioner Reflexive Ongoing Practice Space (PROPS) Google document. The document could be accessed at any time by the mentor or mentee to communicate asynchronously, to reflect and share comments as well as to capture "barriers, enablers, action steps and likely outcomes" (Mentor 2).

The VPLD program played an important part in opening up learning opportunities whereby participants (including the mentors themselves) had the "flexibility in my goals [to be responsive] as my role … has changed" (Survey response, 2016). Self-tailored learning plans provided the freedom for participants to actively develop their talents and "to support others in a similar manner through a [developing] mentor process" (Survey response, 2016). Some participants referred to the nature of the program, which encouraged them to take forward their "knowledge around how to be an effective mentor—from how it has been modelled to me" (Survey response, 2016).

One of the advantages of being a virtual mentor was the flexible ways that mentors could make contact in time, space, and location. Many connections took place during lunch breaks, during nonteaching time, after school, and, in some cases,

in the evening from home. Mentors and mentees could also connect from different locations; as mentor 3 shared "I have in the past just pulled into a picnic area and had the Skype meeting on my phone." An outcome of offering flexible locations to access mentoring was a sense of safety, where mentees were able to select an environment for their mentoring in which they felt comfortable and secure. For some mentees that environment was their classroom or office, for others it was their home. The mentors noted that when connecting from home there was often a different "flavor" to mentoring conversations with mentees talking more frankly and offering more insights into their professional practice. Connecting from home provided the mentor with additional layers of insight into the whole person they were mentoring, which added greater depth to the mentoring relationship. The ability to choose helped nurture the progression of "meeting to know someone and observing the organic evolution of these relationships. As we settle into each other the hierarchy is diffused and safety to challenge is established, conversations get deeper, insights get deeper" (Mentor 1).

A downside to the 24/7 access was maintaining boundaries and a sense of constantly being "on the job." Mentor 4 shares "Sometimes mentees will drop in with a question or a quick update via email and a couple of people will do that on Skype as well. I will often prioritise that sort of immediate contact because if they've got a question, or they need some help, it's that just in time responsiveness which I'm really keen to provide so I'll often just kind of stop what I'm doing and hop in" (Mentor 4). The role therefore required a commitment of time beyond what might be required with face-to-face mentoring. As such, additional skills such as time management, planning, and boundary setting became as important as mentoring skills. Virtual mentoring, nevertheless, overcame barriers of geographic isolation and time, and it ensured equitable access by offering mentees and mentors the flexibility to fit mentoring sessions around their busy schedules and lives.

Working in an online environment, was new to some mentors and the change from face-to-face to virtual took some time to get used to, such that "this seemed to me to be highly challenging since I had, in the past, relied on my experience and personality as a performing presenter in workshops and lectures, and as adviser to schools" (Mentor 2). Collaboratively, the mentors refined the way they worked in the online environment and supported each other to further develop virtual mentoring skills and approaches to the point where they got "used to the way we work in this environment" (Mentor 3).

Reducing Anxiety

The work a mentee did within the VPLD program was separate from a school's appraisal systems, although a mentee could choose to focus on preparing for appraisal during mentoring sessions. As such, there were no conflicts of interest, thereby helping to grow trust between the mentor and mentee. Sometimes working with a mentor who had a different perspective could also assist a mentee to step back and "look" at a situation from a range of viewpoints. In these cases, the mentor became someone that "I could confide in and have an 'outside eye' to help me see the forest for the trees" (Mentor 3). The VPLD program also had the advantage that the mentor was not immersed in the mentee's context and did not have the same constrictions of the school's frameworks, culture, or politics. In the words of Mentor 1: "this PLD is provided externally from the school and is devoid from school politics. Mentees can candidly share their thoughts in a confidential space." Having a safe place to share without a sense of judgement meant that mentees were able to unpack difficulties and discuss uncertainties. The mentee was empowered to recognize when their "wheels were spinning," and in turn work out what was and wasn't within their sphere of influence and then decide on the next steps.

Self-Actualization and the "Heirloom Effect"

A 2011 study conducted in Europe reported that by 2025, educators will have roles as "guides, mentors, friends and partners in self-regulated, personalized, and collaborative learning processes" (Redecker et al, 2011, p. 61). Findings from the VPLD study suggest that this was already underway because participants assumed multiple roles in the online environment, and used ako. They worked and learned alongside each other in reciprocal relationships where they were "supported and mentored by others" (Survey response, 2016) and relished the fact that "you get back in spades what you give" (Survey response, 2016).

Mentor 2 mentioned that "The reciprocity—what I was learning from the mentees—was humbling." Boundaries between mentors, teachers, or experts and learners, apprentices, or novices became blurred, so that there was a sense of "enriched reciprocity" that empowered "both mentee and mentor to delve more deeply into practice and to gather evidence … to measure any shifts" (Mentor 2). The impact has been wide ranging for mentors and mentees; for example, Mentor 4 reflects that "my world view is fundamentally different than when I first started mentoring and this, in turn, helps me constantly evolve as a professional … and a person." Over time, the mentors' investment in the mentees—through regular and responsive online (or phone) communications and inevitable reciprocity—developed into a deeper level of understanding and empathy that enriched both parties.

Professional learning and development in the VPLD program moved away from the formal, intermittent process that often characterizes formal PLD, to PLD that was imbued with intangible value that helped participants feel good about themselves and motivated them to invest time and energy to "pay it forward" like a Rolex watch that is valued because it can be passed onto future generations. By growing capability and developing shared values, the VPLD team was able to cultivate a collaborative culture that attracted "newcomers and … [fed] forward into better results" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 13). As a result, for example, 75% of the DVMs observed that developing as a mentor had positively influenced their own professional practice and well-being, in part because they were both sharing and receiving but also because they felt themselves to be "truly valued as an educator" (Survey response, 2013).

Belonging and Wellness (Shifting the Cultural Framework of Mentoring in the VPLD)

In the unique Aotearoa New Zealand context of the VPLD mentoring program, the mentors explored how virtual mentoring could honor the first people (Māori) and demonstrate culturally responsive and inclusive practices based on the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi .

The team of virtual mentors in the VPLD program critiqued their own approaches to mentoring within Aotearoa New Zealand school sector contexts and worked to embed Māori tikanga (ways of knowing and being). The consequent shaping of the VPLD cultural framework of mentoring was founded on Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ The Treaty of Waitangi principles of:

- participation (through equal, empathic, and reciprocal / ako engagement);
- partnership (through a negotiated and agreed framework in the spirit of whanaungatanga—togetherness); and
- protection (through respect of beliefs, values, languages, cultures, and identities, and confidentiality).

A spirit of ako and whanaungatanga underpinned the online community creating a space which supported multiple languages, cultures, and identities and recognized that "everyone brings something of value to the community" (Mentor 4). In addition, the mentors' regular team meetings included whakatauki (Māori proverbs) that embraced the intention, focus, or feeling of each meeting and a karakia (prayer) ended meetings with a sense of completion and well-being and "encouraged a uniquely New Zealand bicultural component and supported further culturally responsive practices" (Mentor 2). These approaches were also adopted in hui (sessions) with mentees—both asynchronous and synchronous. Specific to each mentor and mentee's collaborative online documentation was the inclusion of a pepeha (introduction) shared between mentor and mentee. This allowed each to share their respective whakapapa (genealogy), turangawaewae (place of birth or a place to stand), whānau (family), interests and any other information that supported Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles. Photographs, short videos, text in te reo Māori and English, along with questions in English regarding preferred cultural practices, were included in the shared Google doc as a means of personalizing "the story of the mentee as their own to tell" (Mentor 2).

From this initial asynchronous practice a negotiated range of protocols were agreed to that were designed to explicitly share cultural understandings and practices during the synchronous meetings. The overarching aim was to challenge a one-size-fits-all approach and instead to "initiate conversations and find out about a person as a whole, while also providing safe, supportive places to talk" (Mentor 4).

These processes were inclusive of the holistic learning approaches of participants who identified as Māori as well as other cultures. All mentees chose to work within frameworks and cultural practices that were comfortable and in which they were able to honor their heritage and participate in the spirit of ako. One mentee of Indian ethnicity, for example, chose to light a candle in their home at the beginning of each mentoring session, something that the mentor also did, as a way of signifying enlightenment and shared learning. The key impact of these shifts was to openly challenge the acceptance of a one-size-fits-all approach to mentoring and recognize that, "we are more than our thoughts and actions and that everyone's reality is different" (mentor 1). Being culturally responsive recognized that we were "not only investing in participants as professionals, but as people" (Mentor 1), but it also creating spaces inclusive of cultural practices and values as the foundation for a healthy community.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT VIRTUAL MENTORING

From the findings above some factors appear to be central in the design and provision of virtual PLD. The authors highlight and discuss these factors briefly in the following section.

Simplifying and Organizing

One of the key findings from this research was that the majority of mentors shared overarching values that made them open to collaboration and engaging in a virtual space. As such, ako and an underpinning sense of "paying it forward" nurtured participants to the point where they were comfortable exploring, in depth, their professional practice. These factors could only be fostered, however, in a program where there was a shared language and understanding about what virtual mentoring comprised and formal (but self-paced) professional learning for mentors (in line with findings from Whatman, 2016).

The VPLD program evolved to have a robust design that enabled a balance of flexibility allowing a wide range of choice and pathways along with enough structure to provide support. The findings indicated, for example, that initial mentoring sessions needed to have a framework that enabled mentors and mentees to build a relationship and also discuss expectations and ways of working and ethics. Inherent to the effectiveness of the mentoring was the coestablishment of norms, boundaries, and rules, which were negotiated and served to shape ongoing processes and behavior. Negotiating and coming to an agreement meant that, for example, a mentor would have the confidence to "make a call around where my role ends—for my own protection as well as theirs—and that's where I had to say that I don't have the professional skills to support them, and to ask to see if they have support in their context" (Mentor 4). The combination of organic and "set" questions helped the mentor to collect meaningful contextual data (Author 1 & Author 2, 2016), which helped them start painting a picture of the whole person. The process ensured that mentees were ready for the virtual environment while also being confident in their ability to influence and shape sessions (Author 1 & Author 2, 2016).

Growing Hope and Affiliation

As the team of virtual mentors worked together, their conceptions and practice of mentoring shifted. Mentors reflected on themselves through relationships with mentees, and in particular they recognized that many mentees' professional foci were closely interconnected with their personal lives. As such, the mentors came to see the holistic development of the mentee as one of the philosophical underpinnings of the VPLD program.

In a virtual world, the team found that they needed to spend time at the outset on "soft" protocols inherent in face-to-face experiences. The shared online document created a space to record thoughts, ideas, and reflections and to revisit personal information and continue to make further connections. For example, many mentoring sessions began with the simple question of "what's on top for you?" or with the sharing of a whakatauki (proverb) to introduce a metaphor that helped describe what the mentee was feeling and experiencing at that moment. This approach, along with the reciprocal sharing in the online document recognized the whakapapa (background and genealogy) and wairua (spirit) of the mentee, provided a deep understanding of the changing context in which mentees were located. The result was a sense of belonging and an opportunity to explore aspects such as well-being and identify positive aspects of their life and work, and how these might influence their future. These approaches supported the mentors to develop a wider range of explorative questions which encouraged deeper,

holistic conversations during synchronous sessions and proved to be essential processes in a virtual environment.

CONCLUSION

Learning by its very nature is change. When people learn they are likely to have evolved their knowledge, skills, or behavior, and they may have explored their beliefs and/or sense of (professional) identity or done a combination of all four. This paper has described some of the fundamental aspects of learning to become, and be, a virtual mentor and some of the considerations and implications of working within a virtual environment in general and in the VPLD program in particular. Framed within the Elements of Value Pyramid, the findings showed that participants felt that they had:

- access to pathways towards "self-transcendence" (Almquist, Senior, & Bloch, 2016, Para. 8);
- participated in initiatives where they had a social impact;
- a strong sense of hope and belonging; and
- access to people, skills, and strategies that helped increase their motivation and self-actualization.

There were overarching values shared by the majority of DVMs, such as ako and an underpinning sense of "paying it forward," that helped nurture participants to the point where they were comfortable exploring, in depth, their professional practice. Notable too was the impact this had on their own personal journey and sense of professional identity. While some of the findings are likely to have been similar in a face-to-face mentoring context, others can be attributed to the virtual nature of the PLD, such as those reliant on trust, regular and easy access, social modelling, and social persuasion from a wider range of practitioners that extended beyond each mentee's immediate professional context.

The results suggested that, by building on the benefits and constraints of the virtual environment, the mentors were able to adapt their mentoring skills and approaches to ensure that the experience for mentees was collaborative, empathic, and responsive to them as diverse human beings. It helped ensure that, even though there were few, or no, nonverbal cues, assumptions were recognized and acknowledged, and protocols were explored.

The findings provided insights into virtual mentors' and mentees' perceptions of working together while participating in an online community of geographically disparate peers. Working with a virtual mentor was seen as essential PLD, especially when a mentee was under stress, because of the guidance and motivation provided. Virtual mentors worked to create online environments and used approaches that recognized factors that influenced the development of strong self-efficacy. The PLD "came to" the mentees, had duration, and fit within mentees' existing professional (and personal) lives while also challenging them (Author 1, 2015). Mentoring fit alongside other forms of PLD that mentees were involved in and helped to ensure a more complementary, consolidated experience that built toward a mentee's goals. Over time the mentors witnessed mentees not only achieving their goals, but also saw holistic and transformational changes in people—in their thinking, their behavior, their envisioning, and their motivation. Some mentees have also chosen to become DVMs, thereby providing a model for sustainable scalable support with education practitioners taking on roles as "change agents" and leaders (Author 1 & Author 3, 2014).

Overall, considerations about learning design in a virtual environment, while not a key feature of the study, are an integral part of the VPLD program. As such, they can be applied to the higher education sector. For example, outcomes are directly relevant to faculty holding office hours in terms of the methodology adopted. Going forward there are plans to explicitly explore the use of learning design in the program. For instance, using the DVM rubric in a more interactive, reflexive way to help mentors inform their practice with direct links to the relevant aspects of the DVM modules in a way that will help DVMs plan and take next steps. Data from using the rubric may also inform "a more rapid prototyping similar to that described in the 'lean startup' strategy" (Ries, 2011, in Fullan & Quinn, 2015, p. 30) of areas that could be developed within the VPLD program and other similar virtual offerings.

The VPLD program offered many ways for DVMs and mentees to "connect deeply across schools … [regions], and even globally" so that ideas were "cross-germinated and refined" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 30). However, while "knowing

what … high quality … mentoring look[s] like in practice is certainly a precursor to wise practice" (Whatman, 2016, p. 20), to have a real impact on education it needs to be part of a wider system change—in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

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