MENTORING AND DIVERSITY: CHALLENGES IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Mentorship has been defined (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007) as a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development which entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). The definition above assumes mentoring as a process involving time, a helping process, personal developmental relationship between an expert and a novice, an apprentice or a protégé which in formal sense referred to as a ‘Mentee’.

Mentorship in a diverse continent such as Africa can come with several challenges and sometimes with emotional consequences. Why this is so has never been a source of concern to teachers, educationists and university academics. This paper presents plausible problematic areas in mentorship in Africa, which according to my view can lead to poor research and student outputs. As a corrective measure therefore, this paper tries to bring to educational practitioners on how best to effectively mentor students in diverse groups. For many academics, particularly those from the west, the challenge is to detect the ways in which the interplay of social and cultural facts and relationships affects the mentee. Therefore, it is important to know, understand and be familiar with the cultural dynamics of the society we work in. In addition, this paper intends to demonstrate how these cultural factors express themselves in mentorship in educational settings in Africa.

Introduction and Definition:

Mentorship has been defined (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007) as a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development which entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé).

The definition above assumes mentoring as a process involving time, a helping process, personal developmental relationship between an expert and a novice, an apprentice or a protégé which in formal sense referred to as a ‘Mentee’. In an educational setting, the mentor is
expected to mediate an expert knowledge for the novice, help develop the mentees’ full potential in a work or school/academic/training settings.

Types:

Mentorship have been used interchangeably with coaching (Halai, 2006), supervisor (Mashego and Duckett, 2010) and instructor and teacher (Fawcett, 2002). However, according to the Wikipedia encyclopaedia (2010), instructing deals largely with the dissemination of knowledge, coaching deals primarily with skill building, whereas a mentor is one who helps shape the outlook or attitude of the individual. According to Halai, (2006), mentoring can be a contested concept given the plethora of ways in which it is defined as a practice about which a clear consensus may not be reached. Colley (2002) have also raised questions about mentoring: “Is there something essential about mentoring *perse*, which defines it apart from other activities such as coaching, guidance, tutoring, pastoral work etc? Does mentoring have a distinctive essence which unites its diverse appearances in various contexts?” (Colley, 2002, p.259).

While these questions point to a lack of consensus in terms of definition, there is no doubt that mentoring as defined in academic literature is generally described based on the roles mentors play.

According to Fawcett (2002), the attributes or characteristics of a mentor include patience, enthusiasm, knowledge, a sense of humour and respect while Borges and Smith (2004) listed time, patient, empathy, ability to communicate, have subject knowledge and skill as qualities of a mentor. Without these attributes a mentor may not be effective. The characteristics of effective mentorship includes nonthreatening, nonjudgmental and cognizant of personal weaknesses.

Other mentoring attributes include:

- A process form
- Active relationship
- Helping process
- Teaching/learning
- Reflective practice
- Career and personal development process
- Formalised process
- Role constructed by or for a mentor
Mentors are those individuals whom one looks up to and want to be like. They have qualities that most admire and wish they could posses. An effective mentor must have the ability to inspire, empower and liberate the trainee to complete the maturation process (Ford, 2004). However, the mentor and trainee must work together to complete the maturation process.

Mentors provide trainees with three kinds of support; namely psychosocial support, when a mentor shows respect for the students as they grow into their professional roles, showing empathy for the students, and sharing personal experiences on how to balance work and family demands. Secondly, instrumental support, refers to a situation when the trainees are taught career-related skills, like how to write and review papers, develop hypotheses, analyze data and teach more effectively. Lastly, mentors may provide networking support by connecting their trainees with influential people in the field and to colleagues at other institutions (Ortiz-Walters and Gilson, 2005).

According to Souba (1999), mentors should have the following seven qualities:

- Motivate,
- Empower and encourage,
- Nurture self-confidence,
- Teach by example,
- Offer wise counsel,
- Raise the performance bar,
- Shine in reflected light

**Mentoring and Diversity**

Yabusaki (2010), conducted a study on clinical supervision and found that diversity was a neglected area in supervision training and research. According to the theory of diversified mentorship, certain aspects of the relationship influences the levels of support and satisfaction, for example, trainees of colour benefit from being mentored by a person who is also of colour because of the comfort and interpersonal attraction that exists when individuals share similar racial ethnic backgrounds (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). A study conducted by Ensher and Murphy (1997) cited in Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005) concluded that trainees felt more supported from same race mentors, although the racial composition of their relationship did not influence satisfaction with their mentors. They also found that mentors provided more psychosocial support to same race trainees.
Personal Experiences with Mentoring

My personal experience with mentoring began at home with my parents-Chief and Mrs Dame Oboh. I was taught to be focused in life and never to procrastinate. My mother will always say, ‘whatever you can do today, finish it’. In my days as a student, it began at the University of Ibadan with Prof Dennis Ugwuegbu who thought me to always have a role model. He became my role model. He was my teacher and later colleague. Later, I met Prof Sylvester Madu who was my teacher at the university and later a colleague in South Africa. He would speak calmly and softly to me about limitless sky. Today, three people have made large and tremendous impact on my academic career: Prof Ugwuegbu (Nigeria), Prof Klaus Boehnke (Germany) and Prof Gail Wyatt (USA). They worked with me and through me to have desirable impact. I have been blessed with mentors who had much impact on my academic career and to achieve academic excellence. Strangely and more important, is the high influence my wife –Victoria Onyeka- has on my personal and academic career. For the past 16 years of marriage life, she redirects my focus when I am about to shift thereby becoming a stable rock for me and with our four lovely children-Aide, Aj, Ebert and Barack- who have been so proud of their papa and taking time to bear with me even if I have to be miles away from them.

Personal experiences with students from diverse groups:

I have taught at the University of Ibadan (UI), Nigeria. Many of the students during my 17 years at UI were largely homogenous. After my UI experience, I taught at the University of Namibia, Windhoek, University of Limpopo, South Africa and North West University, South Africa.

In many southern African universities and mostly where psychology courses are offered, usually students choose their supervisors as opposed to being assigned to supervisors.

According to Fawcett (2002), there is no guarantee that the assigned person will indeed be a mentor because mentees wants to emulate their mentors and this becomes problematic when the assigned mentee does not want to emulate his or her mentor. The author further argued that mentors are selected and not assigned. This is important for both the mentor and mentee as it helps them have a successful and nurturing relationship which leads to the professional growth of the mentee.

Supervision is carried out mainly in two areas: Clinical and Research. The usual practice among students is that they prefer having different research and clinical mentors. What has worked for me over the years is to have same students mentored in research and clinical activities.

The student and staff population characteristics in Namibia and South Africa are diverse and constitute blacks, white (mostly Afrikaners) and coloured. My encounter with students from diverse background revealed several issues that would be discussed briefly below for the benefit of would-be-mentors. In my discussion, I will mainly be discussing my relationship with postgraduate students (Masters and PhD).

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Motivate: A mentor should be able to motivate students by being enthusiastic about what he or she does otherwise, many of the mentees will see you as very dull and may find the process disinteresting. Motivating mentees involves actively engaging them in academic discourses on wide variety of issues of interest. This in my observation arouses the interests and further engages students’ ability to focus.

Cultural sensitivity: A good mentor should be culturally sensitive. Students from diverse background come with different stereotypes and attitudes which may affect mentoring relationship. A good mentor should not make sensitive remarks about a particular race or ethnic remarks that will affect mentee’s academic performance or bring about a layback attitude. In fact not being sensitive culturally may even make some students develop a low-self esteem or even psychopathology. A mentor should not be judgmental and must be impartial.

Knowledge: If people don’t have expert knowledge, then it becomes difficult to mentor effectively. The mentor must have very good knowledge of the subject matter to be effective. S/he must be able to communicate that knowledge effectively to the mentees. Failure in these regards will cause a dissonance and confusion among students.

Empower and encourage: Ability to empower and encourage mentees are good attributes of a good mentor. The mentor should be able to take mentees to the next level of educational achievement. The reason for mentorship is to kind of recreate oneself in another person. In other words, the mentor should be able to clone him/herself in the mentee. The mentee is empowered to do what the mentor was able to do. I have always had problems with institutions where people have PhDs and yet cannot be absorbed as lecturers in that same institution. It’s a reflection of poor mentoring or no mentoring at all.

Also problematic is that some southern African countries (e.g. Botswana) have strong indigenization policies where a local is immediately offered the job of a mentor on graduation. Such a policy abuses a good mentoring process to the extent that the moment a local has been mentored and empowered, the mentor is immediately relieved of his or her job. This can have a delayed effect on empowering the indigenes. Besides, such a policy is unethical and immoral.

Nurture self-confidence: A good mentor should inculcate and nurture self-confidence in mentees. Self-confidence should be nurtured in students through active engagements in research and clinical work, reading, acquisition of knowledge, seminar presentations and other general academic activities. The mentor should be able to observe and correct constructively particularly with adult learners. This is where patience becomes a virtue on the part of the mentor. Students from diverse backgrounds come with different stereotypes and feelings. A good mentor should be able to understand these stereotypes and help change them positively for the student and doing so will help build a very good and lasting relationship between the mentor and mentee.

Teaching by reflection: A good mentor should be able to deliver his or her services within a positive reflection. It’s like they say “doing what you preach” and not otherwise. Here a mentor’s background and life experiences have additional advantages to a successful
mentorship.

According to Ford (2004), a true and effective mentor must be able to attract, inspire, empower, and ultimately liberate the student or trainee to complete the maturation process. A process according to Souba (1999) that involves discovering and refining the mentee’s innate but latent abilities, skills, and talents.

The future of academic and clinical psychology training of students in South Africa where there are diverse groups of students is linked to balancing gender, race of students and recognizing the need to integrate both foreign and local students. At the moment, some of these issues are problematic. Students’ enrollment shows that prospective students want to have their education aligned to racial lines. Student enrollment is skewed with more females than males in some fields and with foreigners not fully integrated in other professional disciplines etc. There is also the existence of black and white dominated universities. The merger as carried out is as yet far from solving the problem—a problem that is historically and politically deep-rooted.

However, South Africa is a great country where great minds are trained in her rich and culturally diverse populations. It is my hope that some of these limitations are overcome so that students can benefit from mentors particularly where the mentor and mentee have different cultures, racial and many other different backgrounds.

References


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