

Education and Cultural Diversity

Book of Proceedings

International Scientific Conference on Multicultural Education

02 - 04 December 2020, Tetovo, North Macedonia



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Mentoring Students from Different Ethnic Groups: Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

Young individuals benefit from consistent relationships with experienced adults who care for them. Researches are showing that quality-mentoring programs have positive outcomes for young people in their social, emotional and academic development. While there is a broad consensus on the overall benefits of positive and supportive mentoring relationships, we know less about the effects of ethnicity and diversity in mentoring relationships with young people.

In a multicultural society, such as the Republic of Northern Macedonia, it can be noted that a good part of the formal mentoring connections often cross the ethnic and cultural communities.

The paper examines the challenges and opportunities of mentoring relationships established between a mentor and a mentee from different ethnic backgrounds and emphasizes the importance of establishing a structure and opportunities that support successful outcomes.

Keywords: mentoring, ethnicity, diversity

Introduction

In the past two decades, educational institutions in our country have placed significant emphasis on increasing the number of students from all ethnic backgrounds and solving performance and graduation problems that usually tended to be lower for these students than for students from majority ethnic background. At the same time, educational institutions, especially higher education, have made significant efforts to demonstrate that diversity brings benefits to all students preparing for the life and jobs that are becoming more diverse. As institutions seek ways to address these frequently complex challenges, educational institutions need to consider their assumptions and roles in a multicultural setting and the modalities of interaction with students from different ethnic groups, as well as to talk with their students about the importance of diversity.

Mentoring as a valuable strategy to provide mentees with emotional and instrumental support in achieving their goals can be especially important for students from different ethnic backgrounds, where lack of adequate mentoring and support can prevent students from achieving greater success at school and lead to increased dissatisfaction. By providing information, guidance, and encouragement, mentors can play an important role in nurturing students' aspirations, helping them adjust and prepare for college or a new job and build a sense of connection to the wider environment.

Numerous papers, professional and research, offer wide interpretations of the importance of the relationship between educational institutions and students coming from different ethnic groups. Most of them conclude that students benefit from mentoring which brings about higher rates of their performance in educational institutions and graduation, as well as increased satisfaction with their experiences in educational institutions, but in order to achieve this, mentoring relationships must be comprehensive and by all means specific for meeting students' social, academic and personal developmental needs.

The paper begins with defining mentoring - what constitutes mentoring and its importance for achieving higher educational outcomes. Then, it goes on with a discussion on the impact of different ethnicity of the mentor and the mentee on the mentoring relationship. Besides, the paper offers measures and suggestions that will help to promote effective mentoring relationships and professional and career development for the mentor and the mentee from different ethnic groups.

1. Defining mentoring - what constitutes it?

Due to the prevalence of mentoring in various fields and a wide range of issues, there are a huge number of definitions in the literature. In fact, there are more than 50 different definitions in the social literature (Crisp and Cruz, 2009). Some describe mentoring as a concept or process, while others use the term to describe a set of specific activities. However, the most powerful mentoring relationships tend to include four characteristics. These features consist in: a) focus on achievement and development of potential; b) reciprocal and personal relationship; c) a relationship where the mentor is an individual with greater experience, influence and achievement; d) a relationship where the mentor provides emotional and psychological support and directly assists in career aspirations and planning through role modelling (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). These four characteristics shift the interaction between students and teachers at the mentoring level.

Mentoring serves different purposes, especially based on the age and needs of the individual. For example, most mentoring in secondary and higher education focuses on

developing the knowledge, competencies and self-confidence necessary to successfully take on one's own responsibilities. Mentoring relationships actually involve providing career, social, and emotional support in a safe environment for self-exploration that should result in positive academic and personal outcomes for students. Effective mentoring - a sustainable, quality relationship with young people should serve as an important, and perhaps even necessary, developmental trump card in the lives of young people.

2. Functional mentoring

Healthy mentoring relationships, what we call functional mentoring, have been identified as crucial in preparing students for careers. Research suggests that functional mentoring is strongly correlated with success and satisfaction in education. There are some common features for all mentors that promote functional mentoring relationships regardless of the identity of the mentee. These characteristics include knowledge, experience, visibility and power. It is often assumed that educators are credible mentors. Many teachers are professionally wise and successful enough to offer inexperienced students key information about professional and personal development. Mentors should be visible within their profession and accessible to mentees. It is imperative that the mentor be visible so that the mentee can follow role modelling.

3. Does ethnicity affect the way the mentor and the mentee relate?

Although there is little research focusing on the ethnicity of the mentor and the mentee in formal mentoring programs, some research on natural and formal mentoring relationships suggests that cultural differences seem to play a role in mentoring expectations, achievements, and experience. (Liang, Tracy, Kauh, Taylor & West, 2006). In one of these researches, students of Latin descent who were associated with mentors of the same background found that they were more helpful in their personal and career development and that they were more satisfied with mentoring programs than students with mentors of other descent. (Santos & Reigadas, 2002).

However, research on natural mentoring relationships shows that when young people choose their own mentors, they tend to choose mentors of the same ethnicity (Cavell, Meehan, Heffer, & Holiaday, 2002) and of the same sex. This suggests that connections from the same ethnic group are significant to many mentees and have a potential impact on the initial attractiveness and expectations of the relationship.

Ethnicity can play a role in the ways in which mentors and mentees relate to each other. More precisely, the quality of mentoring relationships can be shaped by the way some issues are discussed by the mentoring couple. For example, such a mentoring relationship may be affected by the mentor's cultural sensitivities, the mentee's cultural distrust, and the feedback given to the mentee.

Cultural values can affect the level of initiative of the mentees and result in miscommunication or misinterpretation of social signs by culturally unconscious mentors. For example, a study of people from Asia suggests that, despite a strong interest in mentoring relationships, they are less likely to initiate and express interest than non-Asians because of cultural differences in emotional expression and communication attempts. (Liang, et al 2006). Thus, mentors who are insensitive to these cultural characteristics may be less inclined to recognize Asians' interest in mentoring and reciprocal interest.

However, the fact that young people naturally gravitate towards mentors of the same ethnicity does not necessarily mean that mentoring connections of the same ethnicity are more useful than connections of different ethnicities. In these relationships, the mentees from the same ethnicity compared to those from different ethnicities reported that they received more professional support, though the connections by ethnicity were not related to higher emotional support and satisfaction from their mentors. (Liang, 2007).

4. How to strengthen cultural sensitivity in mentoring?

Ethnicity can affect many aspects of the mentoring relationship; for example, when a mentor is chosen by mentees, it can affect the benefits and ways of connecting between mentees and their mentors. Consequently, a number of questions arise regarding the ethnicity of the mentor and the mentee, such as: Is it important that the mentor and the mentees match their ethnicity? Are connections from the same ethnic group more useful than connections from different ethnic groups? Does the ethnic group influence the way the mentor and the mentees relate? Are there other ways to enhance cultural sensitivity in mentoring relationships?

In order to discover the possible answers to these questions, in this section we will try to suggest different ways for overcoming these questions in practice, through several key considerations arising from ethnicity in formal mentoring.

Observation 1: Ethnicity can affect many aspects of a mentoring relationship. However, while connections from the same ethnic group may be desirable, this does not mean that they will achieve satisfactory and useful mentoring connections. For example, some research shows that having similar interests and attitudes is a better predictor of mentors' satisfaction and support from mentors than their demographic similarity (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Solution 1: During the introduction phase, it would be good that the mentor and mentee assess whether ethnic group-based connectivity is important to the mentee and his or her family. If having a mentor from the same ethnic group is less important to the mentee or is not available at that moment, similar interests and views should carefully link the mentor and the mentee. The connection between the mentor and the mentee based on similarities is important in all mentoring relationships, but it is especially crucial in the connections of different ethnic backgrounds.

Observation 2: Research findings on the benefits of connections from the same ethnic group with those from different ethnic groups are combined. However, the benefit of mentoring reflects much more and is more significant than the ethnicity of the mentor and the mentee. Relationships of different ethnicities show that mentors respond to the different characteristics of the mentee including the mentee's identity and cultural values. Moreover, research reveals that mentors need to be culturally competent in order to develop a successful mentoring relationship of different ethnicities (Sanchez & Colon, 2005). Without training in specific competencies, even the most deliberate mentors can make critical mistakes that negatively affect these relationships.

Solution 2: Mentor training is crucial especially in the absence of mentors from the same ethnic group. Continuous training and support can help mentors to better understand and relate to mentees from different backgrounds and give positive results. Such training and support of mentors should be characterized by special attention to cultural topics. Ways of identifying and addressing specific cultural issues, such as the consequences and failure to do so, are just some of the contents that should be covered.

Observation 3: Differences in ethnicity can affect the way in which mentors and mentees relate to each other. Therefore, a culturally sensitive mentor with an understanding of the values and worldview of young people is a key factor for successful communication and connection. However, there seem to be such commonalities that promote positive connections between all mentoring couples regardless of ethnicity. These consist in the attention to developmental and relational processes, in constant mentoring commitment, and in finding similarities between the mentor and the mentee. Relational aspects of mentoring include authenticity, empowerment, and learning to deal with conflict. In order to strengthen such relationships, mentors need to recognize and carefully engage their capacities, as well as to struggle in a way that would promote growth and development. The mentoring relationship can benefit from a developmental rather than a normative approach - one that allows the mentee to explore, set goals and develop together, rather than an approach that imposes goals on the mentoring relationship. In particular, the discovery of commonalities can serve as an early and central step in relating to the mentee and can be the basis for developing a lasting relationship. (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Rhodes et al., 2002).

Solution 3: It is necessary to strengthen close and satisfactory mentoring relationships, regardless of the different background of the mentor and the mentee. The choice of a mentor should be aimed at individuals who possess these relational qualities, appreciate the developmental aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship and are willing to invest time and energy in the mentoring process. Mentor training should also include the development of such "relational skills" (e.g. fostering commitment, authenticity, strengthening and dealing with differences and conflicts) in the context of a mentoring relationship.

Observation 4: Research shows that the approach "one-size for all" is not always effective in mentoring programs and relationships. Although certain qualities of mentoring relationships (e.g., emphasis on authenticity, commitment, empowerment, and empathy in a relationship) can also be generalized to ethnicity, other ways in which mentors and mentoring programs can foster cultural sensitivity need to be considered. More specifically, students from different backgrounds may have special needs and opportunities for mentoring. For example, young people may approach mentoring relationships with certain expectations of connections through hierarchical relationships influenced by their cultural values. In addition, they may face stereotypes as well as other culturally specific challenges that may adversely affect their school achievement and psychological well-being, which are often the targeted goals in mentoring programs. (Linnehan, 2001). Thus, only mentoring that takes cultural issues into account can support students in vitally relevant ways.

Solution 4: Mentoring programs should be designed in a way that demonstrates the sensitivity of theoretical and empirical knowledge of the cultural characteristics of the students being mentored. Combining the universal beneficial aspects of mentoring relationships with responsiveness to the different backgrounds and needs of mentored students can increase the applicability and effectiveness of mentoring relationships.

Observation 5: This paper suggests that mentoring should increase attention to ethnic issues when designing and evaluating a mentoring relationship. More research is needed to examine the impact of mentoring programs that prioritize cultural competencies and culturally specific practices. Currently, culturally sensitive approaches to mentoring are insufficiently studied. For example, relationship mentoring in which the mentor is from a minority group may differ from mentoring in which the mentor is from a majority group.

Solution 5: Further research is needed to examine how different combinations of demographic variables can affect the quality of communication between students and their mentors.

Conclusion:

The paper attempted to reconcile and review perspectives on mentoring and the different ethnic backgrounds of the mentor and the mentee. In a society that emphasizes differences and uniqueness, all students regardless of ethnicity are remarkably similar in their goals, aspirations and desire to be successful. However, students often see the world differently, based on the experiences they bring into their school environments.

The paper suggests that matching based on the same ethnicity may have some advantages, including the fact that mentees tend to gravitate naturally towards mentors of the same ethnic group and gender. However, in mentoring, whether from the same ethnic group or from a different one, other factors may play a greater role in determining the success of the relationship, including the questions [1] whether the mentee perceives his/her mentor as similar (e.g. common interests, personal characteristics, etc.); and [2] whether the mentor and mentoring programs are culturally sensitive. These findings suggest the need for mentors and mentoring programs that will work toward development of culturally sensitive mentoring programs.

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