Mentoring in Education:
Seeking Communication, Competency and Wisdom

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Abstract

Mentoring has long been a means for assisting those new to a profession to obtain proficiency in a timely manner. This article begins with a discussion of the historical significance of mentoring and transitions into a discussion of mentoring models that reflect the varied needs of mentors as they seek to provide encouragement, guidance and leadership to new faculty members. Starting with preschool and progressing through the university level, the article explores and delineates the needs and attributes of a quality mentor. Noting the importance of mentorship programs, the article provides information for administrators and detailed considerations for mentors. Mentees in the field of education seek communication with older, more experienced educators, desiring the competency and wisdom they realize these mentors possess. Discussions attempt to raise the level of awareness of mentees—in essence, providing the background to enable them to ask questions and receive solid advice.

Keywords: mentor, mentee, mentoring, education, novice

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Why Mentor

The source of the term mentor is Mentor, a character in Homer’s Odyssey. When Odysseus, King of Ithaca, went to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted the care of his kingdom to Mentor (Homer, Tran. by Fitzgerald, 1961). Mentor served as the overseer and teacher of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, albeit ineffectively. Thus, the goddess Athena took on Mentor’s appearance in order to guide the young Telemachus through his time of difficulty. In today’s usage, a mentor is an individual who guides another’s development, seeking no personal gain.

Systems of mentorship have their roots in antiquity (Denny, Miles, Hallisey, & Waugh 1998). These systems originate in the Guru/disciple tradition of Hinduism and Buddhism, the discipleship tradition of Judaism and the Christian church, and the apprenticeship used in the medieval guild system. Thus, today’s modern mentorship styles stem from these ancient models. Kram (1985) noted that mentoring involves two specific functions: one being advice for career development; and the second being personal support.

Mentoring Models

In general, as novices move into a new organization, they need guidance concerning the goals, values and expectations, as well as the hidden rules, and the day-to-day inner workings of the organization. Schein (1978) described a model of organizational culture that contains three levels: the artifacts and behaviors; the espoused values; and the assumptions (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Three levels of organizational culture: Artifacts and behaviors; espoused values; and assumptions.](image-url)
In this model, the artifacts and behaviors represent the tangible or verbally identifiable elements of an organization. For example, some of these could be the architecture, the history, the furniture, the dress code or the office humor. Artifacts are the visible elements in a culture recognized by people who are not part of the culture; and because of this, mentees rapidly assimilate this knowledge with little or no help from a mentor. The espoused values, represented by the tone that prevails in the environment such as the degree of professionalism—a watchword, slogan or mantra such as *educating tomorrow’s professionals*, would be suitable in this level. Typically, presidents or governing boards convey the corporate values in a written document that promotes the values throughout an organization. For the second level of organizational culture, the mentor can assist the mentee in understanding the ramifications of those values, how they influence practice and their utility in the day-to-day operation of the organization. The assumptions would be the actual values the culture represents. Well integrated in the dynamics of the organization, they are difficult to recognize from within; consequently, a mentee would need considerable assistance in learning the values and placing the proper level of emphasis on them in daily practice. Mentors and mentees alike could benefit from sharing insights from both vantage points—one from without the culture, the other from within. As the mentee moves into the new position of being a part of the new culture, she still maintains views from her previous culture, which could serve to help the mentor evaluate changes as necessary. In contrast, the mentor plays the role of helping the mentee fit into the new culture by explaining some of the pre-existing rules, values and methods of interacting (Schein, 1978).

Mentors have access to the accumulated knowledge and expertise of their colleagues (Zachary, 2000). They *know the ropes* of the school, business or industry, and they are aware of political undercurrents and hidden rules (Payne, 2005). All good mentors should possess good people skills—this is the first requirement. Additionally, a good mentor will fit one or more (the more the better) of the following descriptors shown in Table 1. In a study of successful leaders, Davis and Garrison (1979) listed these terms as descriptive of a mentor:

Table 1.
Mentor descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cheerleader</th>
<th>master</th>
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<tr>
<td>coach</td>
<td>opener of doors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confidant</td>
<td>patron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counselor</td>
<td>role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developer of talent</td>
<td>pioneer</td>
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<tr>
<td>guardian</td>
<td>seminal source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guru</td>
<td>successful leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspiration</td>
<td>teacher</td>
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</table>
As can be seen from this list, the descriptors progress from a cheerleader who encourages to a confidant who listens to a counselor who advises to a role model who personifies the essence of inspiration and professionalism in dealing with any situation (Davis & Garrison, 1979). This list of descriptors can serve as a useful guide when considering the attributes of potential mentors and their suitability for the mentoring program.

**Mentoring in the Education Field**

The value of mentoring is indisputable in today’s educational settings (Ingersoll, 2012). In teacher education, society demands that Schools of Education produce novices who can teach with proficiency and manage students with positivity. The public, in general, is currently demanding such a high level of competency and accountability that a well-developed mentoring program is essential to serve as a springboard for launching long, fruitful and successful careers (Soen, 2011). A toolbox of strategies is an essential element for dealing with the various situations encountered in the daily life of an educator. Besides students, education professionals must interface frequently with administrators, faculty and staff, school board members, parents and the community at large. The primary requirement is for a newly minted educator to be able to deal with a wide variety of situations, external disturbances, demands and pressures while remaining composed in the face of many challenges.

Induction programs for new teachers flourish, and there is a strong need for these support programs since teachers with five or less years of experience now comprise one-fourth of the teaching force (Ingersoll, 2012). Many states adopt mentoring models to bolster the success of new educators (Rockoff, 2008). These mentors must demonstrate proficiency within a mentoring model, as well as undergo training in peer coaching and collaborative reflection. Missouri requires (Missouri Excellence in Education Act 5 CRS 80-800.010) that each beginning teacher receives a professional development plan covering the first two years of teaching to assist in their development (McEwan, 2002). Wong, Britton and Ganser (2005) reported strong induction programs in Switzerland, Japan, France, New Zealand and China. The school personnel in these countries provided support from multiple sources, which included collaboration, open lessons, practice groups, counseling, lesson-preparation groups and professional development stressing the value of life-long learning.

An effective mentorship program is beneficial to both improving instruction and retention. Data reported for novice educators reveals the following: Only 36% of mentees who worked with mentors a few times a year reported substantial improvement in their instructional skills while the figure jumps to 88% for those who worked with mentors at least once a week (National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1999). Focusing on the retention of faculty in induction programs, Boser (2000) stated that those teachers who did not participate in a program were nearly twice as likely to leave the classroom as those who did participate. When a new faculty member joins an educational institution, one question he might ask is, *How much support am I going to get from the main office and which issues am I expected to take care of on my own?* A new faculty member with lofty ideals may become discouraged when confronted with limited progress, and may not be prepared for the type of students they encounter, expecting a higher level of accomplishment than is present in that setting. Some say that the first year of
teaching compares to “... climbing a cloud-covered mountain ... You cannot see very far ahead and you do not know how high the mountain is” (National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1999, p. 1). Considering elementary school, middle school, high school and colleges/universities separately, similarities and differences exist among the academic groups that warrant examination.

**Early Childhood**

The early childhood environment reveals elements unique to this age and mentors must be cognizant of the needs of a novice teacher in this setting. The early childhood environment must provide the needed supportive structure of rules and routines so essential to establishing a strong foundation for teaching (Wong & Wong, 2009). The teacher must balance the demands of the school district to teach the required curriculum while offering developmentally appropriate activities that support individual learning styles and various ability levels. Young children with their short attention spans need variety in the day—variety of methods, materials, activities and grouping (Bredekamp, 2011). Mentors can provide valuable knowledge about instructional techniques, time allotments for the school day, methods for creating variety in activities and fine points about transitioning from large group to small group to individual work. Keeping the students interested and engaged throughout an eight-hour day is no easy feat and mentors can share what they have gleaned from their experiences in the elementary classroom.

**Middle School**

In the middle school, the structure affects the curriculum, management, routines and social interactions (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009) because students are changing classes, and are more capable of independent work and interact differently with authority figures. Desimone et al. (2014) surveyed and interviewed first year middle school mathematics teachers to study the difference between formal and informal mentors. The researchers found that both formal and informal mentoring played a valuable role in supporting novice teachers in the areas of content knowledge, teaching methods, pacing, and lesson planning, and, more precisely, working with low-achieving students. Students in middle school experience challenges such as physical changes, peer pressure, strong emotions and the desire for autonomy. With such rapid changes in social and emotional growth, those educators who teach in middle school must understand the unique role they play in supporting these growing individuals. As middle school students transition into high school, the challenges become more daunting as they look forward to becoming productive young adults.

**High School**

In high school, the organizational structures have an impact on instruction. Recent changes in technology and accountability led to changes in teaching methods. High school teachers use interdisciplinary teaching to involve students in project-based learning, inquiry and collaborative learning (Corcoran & Silander, 2009). The priorities of high school teachers include more specialization in subject matter and more advising and mentoring of students as they explore life and career choices. Quite often students ask teachers for their opinions concerning the pursuit of part-time and summer jobs while in school. If planning to attend
college, in addition to precollege courses and a good entrance exam score, they want to know how to bolster their chances of success when applying. Thus, a high school teacher needs a wealth of information about instructional methods, advising students and assisting them with matriculation . . . not only of the local colleges, technical schools and trade groups, but also of institutions in the surrounding states.

**College/University**

In the university setting, we see a repeat of the mentoring structure discussed previously in the Pre-K-12 environment; however, while various emphases placed on the different levels of grade school, middle school, and high school, in the college environment a paradigm shift places the instructor on par with peers and administrators. In the university environment, faculty members primarily work independently. One is free to choose textbooks and structure the courses based upon personal experience. State mandates do not drive assignments as in Pre-K-12 (although reviews of almost all college and university programs by professional organizations occur every few years for continuation of accreditation). Furthermore, new faculty might need assistance in developing methods of grading fairly and objectively while upholding departmental and personal standards. Quite typically, students ask, “What do I have to do to get a certain grade in this course?” to which the appropriate answer must be, “You do your best in preparing the assignment(s) and I will do my best at grading.”

Another area where a good mentor can contribute significantly is in assisting junior faculty in their quest for tenure. Tareef (2013) studied the relationship between mentoring and the development of careers in higher education, examining factors such as publication, grants, awards and positions held. At most universities, gaining promotion and tenure require research and publications. The expectation is for faculty members to develop their own independent publication record and, depending upon the college, bring in research funding. If not approached carefully and methodically, this can be a huge time commitment. Developing a good paper for publication requires foresight, knowledge and a sense of direction from the beginning. Likewise, the same challenges will be present when developing an independent research program. The common question will be, “What is your line of research?” While this is thought provoking, it requires much in-depth analysis and reflection and a good review of the current literature from the field. Novices must spend many hours perusing recently published works to stay abreast.

Joining a college or university as a new faculty member can be a daunting and overwhelming experience. Given the time pressures of teaching, advising, pursuing scholarly activities and performing service, junior faculty often feel that there is just not enough time to accomplish all expected of them. As mentioned previously, a new faculty member must immediately possess good people skills. In other professions, the approach is quite different. For example: someone who graduates with a law degree will quite often clerk for a judge; in the business world a new hire will be paired with a manager; in engineering and science, there is someone to check your work; in medicine, experienced colleagues advise novices during the residency. Thus, there are few professions where employers tell new employees to *sink or swim*. Therefore, a mentor is invaluable to a new faculty member striving to gain full understanding of the college environment and implement a plan of action.
Regardless of the academic setting: early childhood, middle school, high school, or university, mentors should make themselves available to listen to the plans, fears and anxieties of mentees; however, the rushed and complex schedule of the academic setting does not always allow for this. Therefore, a fleeting comment may be all that a mentor has time for, yet, this may not meet the needs of the mentee. It is best to have regularly scheduled times when the two parties can sit down together to ask and answer questions. A genuine exchange of ideas will strengthen the relationship while strengthening the novice, the mentor and the school.

Qualities of Effective Mentors

Communication skills, competency and wisdom are qualities that novice teachers seek. To this end, listening attentively to the mentee while asking questions that prompt reflection and understanding serve to support growth and maturity for the mentee. Good articulation is necessary in order to express one’s knowledge, enthusiasm and passion about teaching. This adds to one’s ability to frame critiques in a positive and encouraging manner. Good mentors use time efficiently. Both the mentor and mentee are under time constraints; therefore, the mentor should make good use of time, cutting to the significant part with patience and consideration without wasting their own or the mentee’s time. Another issue is noncompetition: the mentor and mentee do not need to be in competition with each other as is sometimes the case in the university environment, as mentioned by Ensher and Murphy (2005).

The next requirement is professional competency. When selecting from a pool of possible mentors, administrators should select a person with undisputed professional competence. Colleagues will regard good mentors as outstanding and possessing excellent knowledge of pedagogy, subject matter and classroom management skills. This individual should feel comfortable teaching in front of students and peers alike. It may prove beneficial to invite the mentee into the classroom to observe. Conversely, the mentor should be a meticulous observer of classroom practice so to provide the mentee with constructive feedback. Finally, the network of professional contacts that a mentor has could prove invaluable in assisting to launch the career of the newcomer.

According to Aubrey and Cohen (1995), wisdom is the ability to learn from experience and reflection, and the ability to help others develop the capacity to learn from their experiences. When searching for a good mentor, one needs to consider their strengths and weaknesses as well as the quality of their attitude and the integrity of their character. This person needs to be willing to be a role model, because, in essence, this is what will happen in the mentor/mentee relationship. This person must exhibit a belief in and a strong commitment to mentoring and be actively engaged in the professional development of the mentee. John W. Gardner, former secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, espoused his commitment to this principle by stressing responsibility for others in his life’s work (Gardner, 2007). A mentor must be reflective and willing to admit mistakes, sharing this knowledge so that the mentee understands that no one is perfect and everyone learns from mistakes. Resiliency, flexibility, persistence, open-mindedness and a good sense of humor are all hallmarks of a good mentor.
Matching Mentors and Mentees

Bell & Treleaven (2011) note the difficulty in pairing mentors and mentees in the world of higher education. In a pilot program, mentees selected their own mentors from a pool of volunteers. The researchers found that facilitation of the selection and personal connections proved to be two important factors in successful relationships.

In an ideal world, one is able to choose a mentor who possesses all of the qualities noted previously. Additionally, a mentor who is active professionally and in the community and serves on committees is a good role model. However, it may be impossible to find a person who possesses all of the qualities noted who has the time to serve as a mentor. In this case, the Mentoring Mosaic (Bloom, 2007) may be a good alternative. Here, the solution is to use more than one person to serve as mentors for a mentee. Several mentors with specific skills such as subject-matter expertise, technology skills, classroom management skills, knowledge of policies and procedures and knowledge of politics can serve well. Likewise, considering the explosion of information access and the pace of change in the realm of technology that all peoples of the world are experiencing, it is inconceivable that any one mentor will possess all of the desirable attributes necessary to cover all contingencies. Thus, this Mentoring Mosaic becomes even more of a realistic choice (Bloom, 2007).

Mentees Progress in Stages

According to the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (NFIE) (1999), throughout the mentoring relationship, mentors need to remember that mentees develop in stages. The first stage focuses on practical skills and information; the second stage focuses on the art and science of teaching and polishing classroom management skills; and the third stage involves a shift of focus to a deeper understanding of instructional strategies and professional development. Where the mentee enters the matrix and how long each stage lasts depends on the knowledge, experience and skills that the mentee brings to the job. The skillful mentor works to provide the level of assistance when needed; keeping in mind that criticism must be tactful – aiming to build up with every comment (DeBruyn, 2001). According to Bullis and Bach (1989), the mentoring process consists of phases. In the beginning of the relationship, the mentee proves worthy of the mentor's time and energy. Next a bond develops, followed by the separation stage when the mentee experiences more autonomy. Finally, mentor and mentee enjoy equality in their relationship.

Needs of Mentees

Mentees need time to absorb the enormous volume of information that bombards them. Berends (1990) wrote that everything that happens to us is our teacher. Mentees must acquire the secret of learning from their lives, to sit at the feet of their own lives and learn from it. A good mentor will assist the mentee in developing the process of taking the time to reflect and implement lessons learned.

A successful strategy for reflection is to consider an approach that supplies three starting points for triggering one’s thoughts: (a) At first . . . (b) And then . . . (c) And now . . .
Reflection is an essential element for the mentor as well as the mentee. Zachary (2000) listed four specific qualities successful mentors exhibit when engaging the mentee: lending an ear, setting realistic expectations, establishing the big picture, and furnishing a helping hand. For each of these qualities, identification of helpful and “not helpful” approaches occurs. Setting realistic expectations involves the following: developing and maintaining a trusting, respectful and professional relationship; providing the correct level of support; and assisting in setting appropriate, realistic, achievable expectations and goals. To assist in addressing issues by asking key questions, serving as a sounding board and encouraging the mentee to expand her horizons becomes the mentor’s role (Stone, 2004).

Conclusion

Mentorship is important in all aspects of our lives. Historically, mentees who are new to a field have profited and become productive due to the expertise of the seasoned professionals who served as exemplary models. As seen above, the overall characteristics and qualities of a mentor remain the same; only the issues a mentor needs to address change as the setting changes. The benefits of providing quality mentorship in the education field, regardless of the level, are of utmost importance.

Many beginning teachers enter the teaching profession expecting to perform at a level resembling veteran teachers, only to be disappointed when reality proves them wrong (Jones & Pauley, 2003). Career educators continue to be shocked and concerned at the alarming rate that novice educators leave the profession. The option to help stem the tide of this exodus remains open to career educators – that option is the choice to serve as mentors themselves, recalling the early days of their own induction into this challenging career of instructing others, modeling ethical behavior and inspiring new learners to seek excellence. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), expert guidance is crucial to becoming a great teacher. Veteran educators can assist a new generation in their quest to communicate well while seeking competency and wisdom. Developing and implementing a quality mentorship program has benefits for all concerned: mentees, mentors, students, institutions and communities.

References


