Using Interpersonal Communication and Social Penetration as a Means of Strengthening Mentorships in High Schools

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Abstract

Mentoring is an educational process wherein a more experienced person takes time and invests it in a less experienced person in guiding that person in areas of professional life, academic life, and personal life. In today’s high schools, students need teachers to guide them through both their academic lives and also their tumultuous personal lives. Through the Phenomenological Tradition, teachers can mentor students by sharing their stories and listening to the stories of their mentee students. By utilizing social penetration, teacher mentors, through the use of interpersonal communication skills, learn more about their students’ personal lives while divulging more of their personal lives in order to aid in the mentoring process. In this study, participants in successful mentor relationships and junior high and high school teachers were interviewed in order to ascertain what attributes mentors and mentees need in order to be involved in successful mentor relationships, what pitfalls are possible in mentor relationships, and how mature both mentors and mentees need be in order to be effective in mentor relationships. Through these interviews, the research found that the teacher mentor must maintain his/her authority as a teacher and that the teacher must possess enough integrity and maturity to create a relationship wherein the student mentee understands that the teacher mentor is his/her teacher, not his/her friend.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of Study

Mentoring, in its most simple form, may be defined as an experienced person leading a less experienced person (Zimmerman & Paul, 2007); therefore, the mentor relationship has the potential to be beneficial professionally and psychosocially to both the mentor and the mentee. The mentor sharpens his/her leadership skills, and the mentee has the opportunity to be lead by and learn from someone more experienced. At the university and the high school levels, the mentor relationship demands that both participants practice effective interpersonal communication skills. With maturity, these skills increase and become more pronounced, thereby allowing the relationship to be even more beneficial. With adolescents, research shows that mentoring builds self-esteem and confidence levels because the participants feel accountable to one another. In order to be successful citizens, adolescents need to learn this accountability and responsibility as they mature into adults. When an adolescent has a teacher/mentor who exemplifies a successful person, both professionally and personally, the adolescent is able to see the benefits of being the quality of person the mentor models and strives to be like that mentor. Therefore it is important for the mentor to be a mature person of integrity and thus a good example for the mentee to follow.
Statement of the Problem

Adolescents need good role models. They need someone to model for them how to be a good person and a good leader. Mentor relationships between teachers and students allow the students to recognize the benefits of being effective mentors. Teachers who are also mentors are able to model the appropriate attributes necessary in successful mentorships. By mentoring students, teachers develop relationships with their students that not only benefit the students academically and personally, but also model beneficial mentorships.

The literature suggests that social penetration is necessary for mentorships in the different levels of education to be effective and successful. What the literature does not stipulate is where the boundary of intimacy should be in order for the relationship to remain professional. How personal should a teacher be with a student in order to maintain an effective mentorship? Where does the teacher set the boundary between being an authority figure and a being friend? These questions will be explored by interviewing participants in successful, professional mentorships and junior high and high school teachers.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two of this study discusses the communication theories that are critical in understanding mentor relationships. The philosophical assumption of the Phenomenological tradition in accordance with social penetration theory is crucial to understanding the interpersonal skills necessary to developing and nurturing an effective mentor relationship. Mentorships are also defined at various levels, detailing the attributes necessary for their effectiveness.

Chapter Three covers the scope of the study and discusses the methods used to gather information. The method used in this study is personal interviews with successful mentor
relationships and with educators of various backgrounds and experiences who have experience in being both mentees and mentors.

Chapter Four discusses the results of the interviews with the successful mentor relationships and the interviews with the teachers. The results demonstrate what attributes both the teacher and the student need in order to have a successful mentor relationship.

Chapter Five summarizes the findings and discusses the limitations of the study. This chapter also includes recommendations for further studies in mentorships.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal communication is “a mutual, ongoing process using verbal and nonverbal messages with another person to create and alter the images in both our minds. Communication between us begins when there is some overlap between two images, and is effective to the extent that overlap increases” (Griffin, 2009, pp. 58-59). Interpersonal communication is the basis for relationships, whether they are friendships, acquaintances, romances, or working relationships. Our overlapping images connect us to one another. The depth of that connectivity in the phenomenological tradition can be ascertained through communication theory such as social penetration theory that includes self-disclosure.

**Philosophical Assumption: The Phenomenological Tradition**

Phenomenology is basically the way in which a person views his/her everyday life; it’s one’s “perceptions and interpretations of his/her own subjective experience” (Griffin, 2009, p. 49). One looks at the world and his/her experiences through the prism of his/her history and knowledge and thereby ascertains his/her story within that context. Carl Rogers states this philosophy in this manner: “Neither the Bible nor the prophets—neither Freud nor research—neither the revelations of God nor man—can take precedence over my own direct experience” (Rogers, 1989, p. 24).

In order to communicate and build relationships with others, one must, not only attempt to understand his/her own world, but to also be open to others’ world views, to allow the other’s views to be shared. Through his research in defining and developing an ideal communicative environment, Rogers learned that the clients of his counseling practice would be more apt to feel comfortable enough to share their stories with him through the use of interpersonal
communication. Rogers (1989) discerned that, in communication, both verbal and nonverbal, participants should be themselves, dropping all facades; allow themselves to truly listen to one another and try to empathize with one another; create and sustain a safe environment wherein participants are comfortable sharing their feelings and private worlds; and to be accepting and not bounding to fix each other’s problems. In engaging in these propensities of interpersonal communication, relationships are capable of being built and strengthened to a deeper level of intimacy. These interpersonal communication attributes will aid in creating and sustaining successful mentoring relationships in an educational setting, specifically in a high school setting between a teacher and a student.

In order to establish the level of intimacy needed to be present in an effective mentorship between a teacher and student, one must first understand the basic definitions of the mentor relationship. Mentoring, in its most simple form, may be defined as an experienced person leading a less experienced person (Zimmerman & Paul, 2007); but mentoring encompasses more than just a transmission of experiences. Anderson and Shannon (1988) discuss several attributes vital to mentoring, which include nurturing, role-modeling, teaching, counseling, befriending, and developing varied relationships. Cohen (1995) details different functions of mentoring. These include being empathetic, providing information, providing diverse views on varied subjects, challenging mentor behavior in a respectful manner, sharing life stories, and encouraging change. Therefore mentor relationship attributes may be condensed as being defined as a more experienced person leading or guiding a less experienced person in professional and personal developments where both participants in the relationship share a connection that is personal and beneficial to both parties (Zimmerman & Paul, 2007). Although this definition is more fleshed out, it still does not fully define mentorships or the potential
importance of mentoring. According to Stowers and Barker (2010), the mentoring relationship is advantageous to both participants due to a knowledge transfer. The mentor provides learning solutions for the problems that the mentee may come across in all aspects of his/her life. According to Young and Cates (2005), the purpose of a mentor relationship is for both parties to be joined in a “common commitment to achieving success” (p. 64). This success may be transmuted into almost all aspects of life. This makes the mentor relationship potentially a very personal one. Colvin and Ashman (2010) stipulate that the mentor relationship may progress into a true friendship. Young and Cates (2005) go so far as to describe the mentor/mentee relationship in almost romantic terms: “Both mentors and protégés are members of a human relationship. Humans have fun, fight, laugh, and cry. Human beings engaged in a personal relationship become jealous, compete, learn, become bored, have conflict, and forgive” (p. 67). These relational attributes become more significant as the mentor relationship penetrates deeper and deeper into the participants’ stories. Based on the aforementioned definitions, mentorships have the potential to be powerful relationships that affect both the mentor and mentee in virtually all aspects of life in a potentially intimate manner. The question that needs now be asked is how intimate need a teacher/student mentorship be in order to be effective. Need the teacher mentor and student mentee be friends in order for their relationship to be successful academically and/or personally? How deep need their social relationship delve in order to be productive?

**Theoretical Basis: Social Penetration Theory**

Social penetration theory revolves around the development of relationships. Altman and Taylor (1987) state that social penetration theory focuses on interpersonal behaviors “occurring in social interaction and the internal cognitive processes that precede, accompany, and follow relationship formation” (pp. 258-259). In other words, it is the growth of interpersonal
relationships that are beneficial to both participants. Relationships are multi-layered. They begin with surface interactions. As trust develops, participants begin to “forecast outcomes” in the hopes that their interpersonal exchanges gradually will become more intimate (Altman & Taylor, 1987).

Altman and Taylor (1987) describe social penetration as being broken down into four different stages or layers in interpersonal relationships. The first stage is the “orientation” stage. In this stage, individuals make only a small part of their stories available to others. The interaction is guarded and tentative with both participants making concerted efforts to avoid conflict. The next layer of the relationship to be penetrated is the “exploratory affective exchange” layer. In this layer, surface or shallow communication becomes fuller and richer. More aspects of personality are revealed in more detail. Also there is less caution in exchanges; participants are less guarded. Relationships are more cordial, and anxiety lessens. Friendships become more defined in the next stage of penetration, “affective exchange.” In this stage, interaction is even more casual. More personality attributes are shared, and interaction in the relationship increases. Intimacy is explored in this stage because participants are even less guarded. Participants are also becoming more tolerant of less attractive aspects of the others’ personalities. In the final stage, “stable exchange,” interpersonal communication is open, and all aspects of personalities are explored freely. Communication becomes efficient because participants know each other well. Also participants can “reliably interpret and predict the feelings and probable behavior of the other” (Altman & Taylor, 1987, p. 259). It is in this stage that self-disclosure is open, allowing for more intimacy.

In order to create an effective teacher/student mentorship, interpersonal communication must penetrate through these layers so that the participants in the mentorship are able to be open
and honest with one another in order to give and receive nurturing criticism. The question is how deep should these relationships go, and how deep is too deep? Is there a threshold that should not be crossed in educational mentorships?

**Literature Review**

**Mentoring in Higher Education**

As previously stated, mentorships are educational processes. They transcend the traditional classroom setting, establishing more intimate relationships between the teachers and the students. In a higher education, mentorships have been used among faculty, between professor and student, and between student peers.

**Faculty Mentorship**

In academe, mentors provide mentees with contacts and introductions to colleagues (Hall & Sandler, 1983; Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Yoder, 1984 as cited by Dunleavy & Millette, 2007). Mentors also teach protégés to meet work requirements and to develop personal work ethics (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Kram (1985) stipulates that mentors assist protégés in psychosocial areas such as role-modeling, acceptance/confirmation, counseling, friendship, sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure/visibility, and challenging assignments. These are interpersonal communication skills that benefit both participants in the relationship. Based on these skills, Dunleavy and Millette (2007) found that they could measure the success of a mentor relationship by questioning the participants in a mentorship on how well they communicate with one another. In essence, mentor faculty members help their protégé faculty members to gain confidence through honing interpersonal skills to become better professors.
**Faculty/student Mentorship**

The mentor relationship between a college professor and student goes further and deeper in terms of intent and involvement (Mertz, 2004). Zimmerman & Paul (2007) characterize the professor/student mentorship as a means of providing the student with an attainable goal as to what he/she can be in the future, aiding the student professionally and personally outside of the classroom, and deepening the supportive relationship as the students transition into a profession.

In order to be effective mentors, faculty mentors need to be successful communicators. Stowers and Barker (2010) state that faculty mentors need to exemplify sound communication principles by monitoring their students’ nonverbal behavior and asking open-ended questions in order to always be challenging the thinking of their students and pushing them into finding their own solutions. In order for this relationship to be nurtured into growth, an atmosphere of safety and trust must be established by the mentor. According to Stowers and Baker (2007), discussions between faculty mentors and student mentees are “conversations with goals” (p.367). The faculty mentor must generate an understanding of the mentee’s academic challenges and background, foster ideas from the student, and compliment the students (Stowers & Barker, 2010). Mentors must also convey empathy towards their mentees (Cohen, 1995). Student mentees need to feel that their faculty mentors understand where they are in their lives. The faculty mentors have been in the same positions as the students and should demonstrate and reassure the student mentees that they will survive and succeed as professionals upon leaving the world of academia. The professor mentor and student mentee form a relationship wherein the mentor teaches the mentee, and the mentee follows that training (Kalbfleisch, 2002). In a professor mentor / student mentee relationship, at the college level, the professor communicates with the student in a way that enables the student to divulge his/her goals. The professor mentor then guides the student
mentee toward those goals by knowing the student and his/her capabilities. The professor
guides the student through both nurturing compliments and by challenging the student mentee.

Peer Mentoring in the University Setting

In the university setting, the two common ways in which students aid other students are
peer tutoring and peer mentoring. Peer tutoring involves a more experienced and academically
advanced student assisting a lower level student with academic content (Colvin & Ashman
2010). Peer mentoring involves a more experienced student guiding a less experienced student
in both academic and personal aspects of university life. Peer mentors provide “advice, support,
and knowledge to the mentee” (University of South Australia, 2003 as cited by Colvin &
Ashman 2010, p. 122). As peers, the lack of a “hierarchical” relationship may make
communication, support, and collaboration simpler, thereby producing benefits such as
friendship (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McDougall & Beattie, 1997 as cited by O’Neil Marsick,
2009). As with the faculty/student mentorship, the peer relationship in the university setting
depends on the level of skill the participants have in interpersonal communication. In their study
comparing “e-mentoring” to face-to-face conversation, Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Yarbrough, and
Rosopa (2008) find that e-mentoring (that is mentoring through the use of electronic devices), in
the absence of nonverbal communication (face-to-face), which adds warmth and emotion to
conversations, causes lapses in pertinent information and psychosocial support, changing the
dynamic and lessening the positive impact of the mentorship. Conversational and interpersonal
skills such as listening also play important roles in peer mentorships. Young and Cates (2004)
find that peer mentorships that include two types of listening: emotional understanding and
directive listening. In emotional understanding, the mentor is listening to the mentee, expressing
support, understanding, empathy, and a care for the mentee’s feelings. In directive listening, the
mentor is listening in order to give advice or opinions to the mentee on a more cerebral level (Young & Cates, 2004). Mentee listeners want their mentors to speak to them with respect that acknowledges the mentees’ “competence, appreciates their sense of freedom to choose, and is given in a spirit of affiliation” (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006 as cited by Kerseen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008). But mentees also want mentors to have fun with them. Young and Cates (2005) stipulate that emotional and directive listening are important in assisting the mentor to acclimate to their surroundings; they also find it important for the socialization of the mentee for the mentor uses playful communication. Playful communication is informal communication that includes joke-telling, story-telling, gossiping, and even light teasing (Young & Cates, 2005). These skills do not happen overnight; they must be practiced over a period of time with both participants being mindful of one another. This time spent with one another constitutes a weighty investment: therefore, when a conflict arises, the esteem that they hold for one another aids in the rectification of the conflict. Kalbfleisch (2002) stipulates that this forgiving and respecting occurs because of the strength of their relationship.

In peer mentoring in a university setting, the peer mentor / peer mentee relationship is enhanced by the camaraderie of campus life. Both participants in the relationship are students; thus social penetration in the relationship can delve into the stable exchange stage. The peer mentor and the peer mentee can be friends. The esteem that is necessary for this relationship stems from listening and empathy. Although the peer mentor may tutor the peer mentee academically, the mentor’s main objective is to help the mentee socialize in the university setting.

**Mentoring in High Schools**

Mentoring relationships have many benefits for students at the university level. In order
for these principles to be applicable for high school students, the students must feel comfortable enough in the teaching environment to take on the risks and vulnerabilities associated with mentoring. When students feel that they have a safe and secure relationship with their teachers, they are more apt to take risks such as mentoring. The students need to know that their teachers care. Caring teachers trust their students by granting them a certain amount of autonomy and chances to make their own decisions (Stipek, 2006).

In order for high school students to become mentors to either peers or younger mentees, they must be willing to take on the responsibility that comes with the relationship. Wood, Larson, and Brown (2009) suggest that you coax adolescents into being more responsible by giving them more responsibilities and keeping your expectations high. By holding teens accountable to one another, they will take on that responsibility for the sake of their peers. Campolongo (2009) relates that in the cases he studied, students held each other accountable to agreed on standards where both the mentors and the mentees felt valued. The key is to have a program that is structured and that has set criteria and standards for the participants. The program must strive for positive outcomes that benefit the participants by building their self-esteem; mentor and mentees have the opportunity to build one another up instilling loyalty, trust, honesty, and sincerity towards each other (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993).

These benefits may be more pronounced in cross-age mentoring. In cross-age mentor relationship, a high school student will mentor a younger student, typically in junior high. These relationships allow the high school student’s leadership and collaboration skills to grow while also raising the level of the younger mentee’s connectedness, self-esteem, and academic prowess (Karcher, 2008). Again these relationships take time and attention and must have a structure and purpose. Parameters and guidelines must be adhered to in order to ensure that the relationship is
effective and beneficial for both participants. The student mentor must be mature enough to embrace this responsibility and have enough integrity to care and be empathetic toward his/her younger student mentee.

The teacher mentor/student mentee relationship can be paramount in teaching and exemplifying the appropriate attributes necessary for the student mentee to learn to be an effective student mentor. In order for the teacher/student mentorship to benefit the student in this manner, the participants must socially penetrate into each other’s lives in order to build the trust necessary for their relationship to grow. If the teacher penetrates too deeply into the student’s personal life, the student may still consider the teacher a mentor or the teacher may be considered to be the student’s friend. If the teacher becomes the student’s friend, the student may not respect the teacher as an authority.

**Research Question**

This literature review details the different functions and attributes in a mentor relationship. The mentor relationship has the potential to be beneficial professionally and psychosocially to both the mentor and the mentee. At the university and the high school level, the mentor relationship demands that both participants practice effective interpersonal communication skills. With maturity, these skills increase and become more pronounced, thereby allowing the relationship to be even more beneficial. With adolescents, research shows that mentoring builds self-esteem and confidence levels because the participants feel accountable to one another.

The research demonstrates that there are benefits for a teen in being both a mentee and a mentor. Teachers who are also mentors are able to model the appropriate attributes necessary in successful mentorships. By mentoring students, teachers develop relationships with their
students that not only benefit the student academically and personally, but also model beneficial mentorships.

The literature suggests that social penetration is necessary for mentorships in the different levels of education to be effective and successful. What the literature does not stipulate is where the line of intimacy should be drawn in order for the relationship to remain professional. The teacher mentor needs to maintain his/her role as an authority figure in order for the student mentee to respect and accept the criticisms the teacher mentor provides in order for the student mentee to grow both academically and personally. If the teacher mentor becomes too intimate with the student mentee, then it is possible that the mentee will no longer accept the advice and wisdom that the mentor is there to provide. Accordingly, the following research questions are advanced:

RQ1: How personal should a teacher be with a student in order to maintain an effective mentorship?

RQ2: Where is the boundary between being an authority figure and a friend?

RQ3: How intimately should an interpersonal relationship penetrate in order to be effective but not too intimate so as to become distracting to the learning process?

RQ4: Can a teacher mentor guide a student mentee who considers that mentor to be the mentee’s friend?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of this Study

Mentorships between teachers and students are intimate relationships wherein the teacher mentor exemplifies and directs the student mentee in ways that will, ideally, enable the student to advance both academically and personally. Because the relationship is personal and intimate, the teacher mentor must be mindful as to how best to guide the student mentee, without allowing the relationship to be too intimate, thereby endangering the relationship. The purpose of this study is to ascertain a better understanding of how intimately teachers in mentorships should penetrate interpersonally in order to still be effective both professionally and personally to the student mentee. In addition, the study will seek to ascertain if and where the line exists where the teacher mentor/student mentee relationship is intimate to such an extent that the professional relationship is endangered in its effectiveness.

Since mentorships are personal, intimate relationships, a qualitative study was done, first interviewing two professional, adult mentor pairs. The first mentor pair was male/male. The second mentor pair was male/female. Eleven high school and junior high teachers were then interviewed regarding their views and experiences in mentoring their students. Six of the teachers were male, and five of the teachers were female. No students were interviewed. The testing ground for this study involved different elements of the community. First two different pairings of professional, adult individuals involved in mentor relationships were interviewed. These pairings were selected from churches and educational institutions. These pairings do represent the general population; rather these selections were dependent on the apparent success of these individuals in their mentor relationships. The goal of these interviews was to ascertain
important personality characteristics, communication skills, and goals that are or could be necessary in initiating and participating in successful mentor relationships. The results of these interviews were coded to ascertain commonalities and trends pertaining to these skills and attributes. Once these codes were compiled, teachers within the private, Christian school were interviewed pertaining to their experiences or lack of experiences with mentorships.

Methodology

Interviews

In the initial mentorship interviews with the adult professionals, the mentor was asked open-ended questions in order to ascertain why the mentor wanted to take on the responsibility of being a mentor, what makes him/her qualified to be a mentor, and what qualities he/she look for in his/her mentees. Then the mentee was interviewed separately to ascertain why he/she feels they need or needed a mentor, what qualities he/she wants and needs his/her mentor to possess, and what attributes he/she feels he/she needs to be successful a mentee. The individual interviews took approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. The mentorships were then interviewed together. They were asked what makes their relationship work well, how do they communicate, what are the most beneficial attributes of their relationship, and how do they cooperate to obtain a goal. They were also asked about what they see as potential pitfalls in the mentor relationship, and how do they avoid those pitfalls. These interviews took approximately twenty minutes. In this manner, the teachers were interviewed. They were asked questions about their experiences with mentorships as mentors of students. These questions were based on the responses from the professional mentorships previously interviewed.
All interviews took place in relaxed and comfortable environments. A voice recorder was utilized so that the interviewer stayed focused on the interviewees. The interviews were summarized, noting commonalities and discrepancies of answers to like questions.

Ethical Issues

At the onset of each interview, the interviewer told the interviewees the purpose of the interviews, the nature of the questions that were to be asked, and assured confidentiality. Each interviewee remains anonymous in the study. Each was coded based on sex and years of teaching/ministry experience.

The anonymity of the interviewees allowed them to speak freely and to answer questions without fear of repercussions. In discussing levels of intimacy that can occur between the teacher mentor and the student mentee, there are issues that may come up that may make the interviewee feel uncomfortable. The interviewee may have a personal story or know of an occurrence that will reflect poorly on them or colleagues of theirs. The anonymity assured the interviewees that the information divulged in this study would not be linked to them.
CHAPTER 4
Study and Analysis

Introduction

In order to ascertain current teachers’ thoughts and experiences pertaining to the mentorship of teenagers, the researcher interviewed fifteen individuals who are currently working as high school teachers, counselors, and/or ministers. In order to establish a baseline or control as to what an effective mentor relationship is, the researcher first interviewed a pulpit minister in the Church of Christ and his mentee. This mentor had thirty-five years experience working with the same congregation. He holds a master’s in Theology and a Doctorate of Ministry in Church growth. His mentee has been in ministry for thirteen years as a youth minister, campus minister to a Christian private high school, and pulpit minister. He holds a BA in ministry, a master’s in Divinity, and is seeking is Doctorate of Ministry in Congregational Leadership. The elders of the home congregation of these ministers established this mentorship. Their goal is for the younger preacher to be able to step into the role of the pulpit minister when he is ready to retire.

The researcher also interviewed a teacher/director with thirty-three years teaching/directing experience in two different public high schools and his mentee of twenty years. This mentor first taught/directed his mentee when she was a freshman in high school. He taught her all through high school and was her advisor and mentor in accordance with her student teaching during her senior year college, where she was working toward her Language Art degree and teaching certificate. He is now her peer and mentor as they both teach and direct in different schools in the same community.
Based on the information gleaned through these interviews, the researcher interviewed eleven other teachers to ascertain the benefits and pitfalls of mentoring high school students in today’s society. The teachers range in experience from two years to thirty-five years of teaching. All of the teachers have bachelor degrees with teaching certificates. Four of the teachers have bachelor degrees in psychology, one in social studies, three in language arts, one in music, one in social work, and one in forest management. The teachers, as a group, have masters’ in ministry, secondary education curriculum, English, psychology, counseling, and dramatic arts. One of the teachers has a doctorate in ministry focusing on marriage and family. There were six male teachers interviewed and five female teachers interviewed. Eight of those interviewed currently teach in a private, Christian high school. Of those eight, four have experience teaching in public schools. The remaining three teachers interviewed currently teach in public high schools.

Exemplary Mentorships

The researcher interviewed the experienced pulpit minister (from hence to be called Gary) concerning his relationship with his mentee of six years (from hence to be called Jason). Gary believes that being a mentor is a calling by God. He defines a mentorship as a relationship wherein the mentor guides and counsels the mentee toward a common goal. He says that he doesn’t like the title “mentor.” “The relationship between “Jason” and I has been serendipitous. It’s organic. It’s not an intentional thing. We are just comfortable in each other’s skins” (November 8, 2012). Gary stipulates that the most important role that he has in the relationship is to be a good example to Jason. He compares their relationship to that of Paul and Timothy in the New Testament. Gary also compares the relationship that he has with Jason to the relationship he has with his two sons (both of whom are also pulpit ministers). He feels that his role is to prepare Jason for the future, to guide him in acquiring the skills and wisdom necessary
to step into his role when he retires. Gary stipulates that his most important attributes as a mentor are consistency, authenticity, credibility, and integrity. He feels that Jason must see him “living the life” (November 8, 2012).

Jason describes a mentor as “one who helps you find your voice” (November 8, 2012). He also explains that the mentor must be credible and authentic in order to be followed. The mentor is the working product that the mentee is striving to become. Jason also stipulates that the effective mentor respects the mentees individuality. He says that Gary does not force his views or his will on Jason. Rather Gary embraces and nurtures Jason’s talents and gifts. Jason describes Gary as being both humble and gracious.

When Jason and Gary are interviewed together, they relate how they aid one another in their work. Jason describes this as “iron sharpening iron” (November 8, 2012). They cooperate in their ministry. Gary gives direction and advice when asked, but, mostly, Jason learns through Gary’s example. Further in the interview, Gary clarifies their relationship to be more of an apprenticeship. Gary loves and cares for Jason and his family, and wants him to be successful in all facets of his life. This includes Jason’s personal life. Gary knows Jason’s wife and children. Jason asks for advice concerning his personal family issues because of the trust that has built between them.

This is a successful mentorship because it is effective and beneficial to both the mentor and the mentee. The success of this relationship can be attributed to both participants’ maturity and respect for each other. Gary is nearing the end of his career. As a result, he has gained wisdom in terms of how to work well with people and how to avoid pitfalls that often lead to ineffectual relationships, such as jealousy, pride, and distrust. Jason also has maturity in
ministry, but also understands that he has much more to learn. He has a willingness to learn and a respect for the wisdom of Gary.

Another example of a successful mentorship is that of two teacher/directors in the city school system. The mentor (from hence to be called Mike) has been teaching for thirty years. He holds his bachelor’s degree in English and psychology. He also holds a master’s degree in theatre directing. He first started teaching the mentee (from hence to be called Amy) in this relationship when she was a freshman in high school. He directed and taught her through all four years of high school. During her senior year of undergraduate in college, Mike was Amy’s mentor through her student teaching. Upon graduation, Amy replaced Mike at her alma mater, and he transferred to teach/direct at his high school alma mater.

Mike defines being a mentor as a calling from God. He says, “as a Christian, I feel that it is expected that I build relationships with my students. I love my students unconditionally” (November 3, 2012). He qualifies this love by describing it as a fatherly love. Mike stresses the importance of maintaining his authority as a teacher. He loves them, but he will also discipline when necessary. Mike makes a distinction between being friendly and being a friend. He illustrates this concept with the following anecdote:

During my third year as a teacher, I had a student who I got pretty close with. At that time, it was very important to me to be the cool teacher. I wanted all of my students to like me and feel comfortable around me. I wanted to be their confidant. This student, in particular, opened up to me. His dad was out of the picture, so I thought I was taking on the role as the cool dad for him. On the day of the prom, this student came me and asked me if I would rent a hotel room for him and his girlfriend. I was shocked. I said to the student, “Not only will I not do that, please tell me what I have done that would lead you
to believe I would?” The student replied, “well, I thought you were cool.” That was a huge wake-up call to me. I learned right there that it was my responsibility to draw and maintain that professional line between being a teacher and being a friend. I am a teacher. (November 3, 2012)

He stresses that students are humans and that humans need one other. Mike explains that there are certain students that he gravitates toward because they fulfill a need that he has as a teacher. He connects with certain students; therefore he builds a relationship with them that is give/take. Amy was one of the students that Mike connected with. Mike says, “Amy has a passion for people and for theatre. She was willing to go beyond where the students would be willing to go understand a character or scene. She cared more. That drew me to her” (November 3, 2012).

Amy gives Mike a great deal of credit for the career path she has followed. She describes their mentorship as she “sitting at his feet” (November 3, 2012). She explains that she always wanted to do her best in order to please Mike. As Amy matured and became a teacher/director herself, she says that her relationship also matured. She jokingly says that whenever she had a problem she would ask herself “WWMD—what would Mike do?” (November 3, 2012). Transitioning from a teacher/student mentorship to a peer mentorship was a simple one because of the respect Mike and Amy have for each other. Mike explains that he is proud of the teacher and director that Amy has become; he wanted to continue to be there for her and help her as a professional. He continues also to advise and mentor her in her personal life. Amy’s children call Mike “Uncle Mike.” He was instrumental in their potty training. When they were successful in using the potty correctly, the first thing they wanted to do is call Uncle Mike and give him the good news. Again, Mike stipulates that he thinks of Amy as one of his own children, but this relationship also carries over into the professional world (November 3, 2012).
Mike and Amy have worked on several shows together as co-directors. Still when she has a problem with a student or cast member, her first call is to Mike.

These two mentor relationships are prime examples of successful mentoring. They demonstrate the maturity and caring necessary to create a professional bond that can still be beneficial in their private lives. Based on these two interviews, the researcher formulated a series of questions to interview other teaching professionals. The purpose of these interviews was to gain more insight into how a teacher can create and nurture a mentorship while maintaining the authority necessary for the student to make the distinction between teacher and friend.

Teacher Interviews

*What is a mentorship?*

The researcher first asks the teachers to define mentorships. In doing so, the teachers establish their experience as mentors and mentees. One of the teachers, who has a BA in psychology, a master’s in ministry, and a doctorate in ministry focusing on marriage and family (from hence to be called Jon), defines mentorships as discipleships. He derives this definition from the way in which Jesus mentored Peter, James, and John. Mentor relationships are both personal and intimate, but the mentor maintains his authority. Jesus shared personal aspects of his life with Peter, James, and John, but they always referred to him as Rabbi and then Lord. Jon explains that the mentee follows the mentor because of the mentor’s authority and because the mentor demonstrates that he cares for the mentee.

Another teacher, who has nineteen years of experience teaching band (from hence to be called Larry), defines a mentor as one who is a Christian example that students may look to for guidance and counsel. Four of the other teachers also define a mentor as one who guides or
provides counsel. Two of these teachers also have degrees in counseling (from hence to be called John and Dee). Dee adds that, as a counselor, she also must express that she cares for her students. She wants them to feel comfortable bringing their problems to her so that she may guide them. She stipulates that the authority she has as a counselor/teacher is imperative because the mentees know that she has their best interest at heart. She says, “you must demonstrate authority in order to give advice. You don’t go to a friend for advice; you go to someone who you know has wisdom and your best interest” (October 31, 2012). John states that a mentor must have integrity, that the purest definition of a mentor is one who shares his wisdom and experiences with the mentee. The mentor must have integrity because of the power and authority he has over the mentee. The mentee trusts the wisdom and intentions of the mentor.

Only three of the teachers join Jon in stipulating that mentors involve themselves in the personal lives of their students. One of these teachers, who has a BA in psychology and ten years experience teaching high school and college students (from hence to be called Pam), stipulates that it is imperative to know the personal lives of her mentee students. Pam invites these students into her home, shares meals with them, and introduces them to her family. Her mentees often reciprocate by inviting her into their lives outside of school. Pam’s caveat is that she maintains her authority as teacher. She does not allow them to call her by her first name. She also sets boundaries with them by informing them that they should not confide information to her that would jeopardize their relationship. She tells them that she will counsel them, but that she also reserves the right to talk to their parents if need be. This openness establishes trust in the mentorship.
What are the attributes of an effective mentor?

Collectively the teachers provide the following attributes as necessary to being an effective mentor: kindness, care, acceptance, accountability, guidance, having a willingness to listen, being nonjudgmental, being positive, honesty, empathy, trust, patience, being even-tempered, maturity, and availability. Another attribute that four of the teachers included in their lists of imperative attributes is the willingness to spend time with your mentee. John stipulates that quality time with a mentee does not have to be “intense one-on-one conversations. It can be a walk down the hallway or a five-minute chat at lunch. It’s important that the student know that you are there” (October 29, 2012). A teacher with a BA in language arts and a masters in English (from hence to be called Brandy) explains that it is also important for the mentee to see you outside of school. She says to “go to his ballgame, go to her play, do a service project together. You need to let them see you as both a teacher and a human being” (October 30, 2012).

What are the potential pitfalls of mentorships involving teachers and students, and how can these pitfalls be avoided?

Seven of the teachers interviewed stipulated that the major pitfall of these mentorships is allowing the student to believe that the teacher is a friend. One of these teachers, a drama director with twenty years experience in teaching at one school (from hence to be called Dwayne), stated that when he first started teaching, he needed the students to like him. His desire was to be the cool teacher that the kids flock around. Their admiration fed his ego. He learned that he had a hard time getting the students to follow his directions or to even take him seriously because his students looked at him as his friend. As he matured as a teacher, he learned
to differentiate between “being a friend and being friendly” (November 3, 2012). Dwayne provided this anecdote to illustrate this point.

My wife was one of my students eight years ago. When she was my student, I saw her as a girl who was very sad because her parents were having marital problems. She would come to my room and pour her heart out to me. I would just sit there and listen. I barely said anything to her; I just let her get it off her chest. This went on during her sophomore year. When she was a junior and senior, she helped with costumes and set for some of my shows. She never really talked anymore about the problems she had as a sophomore. After she graduated, I didn’t see her again for about five years. A friend of hers had a sibling in one of my shows. She came up to me after the show and reintroduced herself. We struck up a conversation about art and theatre, and it can kind of went on from there. I don’t consider her to be the same person as the student that I knew, and she says that does not she see me as her old director. We are both more mature people now. We are different.

Dwayne was friendly to the student and a good listener, but the relationship did not go beyond that until they were both more mature.

The teacher that was interviewed, who had the least experience at two years teaching (from hence to be called April), says that her biggest struggle is defining where to draw the line between teacher and friend. She says that she wants to be seen as the authority, but that she also wants to be seen as the “cool” teacher. She wants the students to be able to open up to her. She also stipulates that she really doesn’t like the students calling her by her formal last name. She says, “It just makes me feel old. I remember, as a student, wanting so badly to call my teachers
by their first names. I thought that would be so neat” (November 1, 2012). She says that she knows that she must set boundaries, even if that means not being seen as “cool.”

How does maturity (both of the mentor and mentee) factor into the effectiveness of the relationship?

All of the teachers interviewed spoke of the importance of maturity that is inherently necessary for both the mentee and the mentor. Larry explained that it is part of the responsibility of the mentor to help cultivate maturity in your mentee, but that the mentee must have a willingness to learn and enough maturity to accept that responsibility. Jon says that students are not mature enough for mentorships until they are sixteen. He says, “Most teens are self-centered and are not willing to look beyond themselves to others. Teenagers are parasites. They must be mature enough to put the thoughts and feelings of others above themselves” (October 25, 2012). Mentors/teachers must be mature enough and have enough integrity to understand the gravity of their roles. Mentors have the potential to wield a great deal of power and influence on their mentees.

Discussion

Mentor relationships between teachers and students can be very beneficial to both the teacher and the student. By being a mentor, a teacher may gain a more intimate and rewarding relationship with the student. The teacher mentor hopefully aids and watches the student grow and mature into an accountable, responsible adult. The teacher is able to share aspects of his//her personality and personal life outside of the classroom, wherein the student mentee is able to learn from and be guided by the teacher mentor concerning life choices and personal decisions that are exemplified by the teacher mentor. The student mentee is able to enter into a relationship with the teacher mentor that goes beyond the classroom. The student mentee can be counseled and
guided by the teacher mentor in a manner that is more intimate than the typical teacher/student relationship. This mentorship allows the student mentee to learn, not only academics, but also key lessons concerning personal choices that are exemplified by the teacher mentor.

One of the major pitfalls or dangers that accompanies the teacher mentor/student mentee relationship is the teacher mentor becoming friends with the student mentee. All of the teachers interviewed stressed that when the student recognizes the teacher as a friend rather than an authority figure, the teacher has less influence on the student. Several teachers stated that students do not seek or take meaningful advice from their friends; rather they will seek a trusted authority figure and garner advice from him/her. The teacher/mentor must be intimate enough with the student mentee to gain the trust of the teacher mentee but not so close as to become friends with student mentee. Interviewed teachers qualified that they do not allow their student mentees to call them by their first names. They said that this helps to maintain their authority. Teachers interviewed also said that they do not get too personal with student mentees. They said that determining the line of what is too personal or not depends on the maturity of the student. The student mentee must be mature enough to understand and appreciate the importance of the teacher mentor. The student must also be mature enough to understand that the teacher mentor may only be effective if the student mentee sees the teacher mentor as an authority figure.
CHAPTER 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Summary

Mentoring is an educational process wherein a more experienced person takes time and invests it in a less experienced person in guiding that person in areas of professional life, academic life, and personal life. The mentor also shares his/her experiences and wisdom with the mentee through the use of interpersonal communication skills. In today’s high schools, students need teachers to guide them through their academic lives and, often times, their tumultuous personal lives. Through the Phenomenological Tradition, teachers can mentor students by sharing their stories and listening to the stories of their mentee students. By utilizing social penetration, teacher mentors, through the use of interpersonal communication skills, learn more about their students’ personal lives while divulging more of their personal lives in order to aid in the mentoring process. As the participants in the relationship delve through the stages of social penetration, they share more and more with one another, opening up more, and becoming better and better acquainted until they come to the threshold of friendship.

In this study, successful mentor relationships were interviewed in order to ascertain what mentorships are, what attributes mentors and mentees need in order to be involved in successful mentor relationships, what pitfalls are possible in mentor relationships, and how mature both mentors and mentees need be in order to be effective in mentor relationships. Based on these interviews, high school and junior high teachers were interviewed to gain more insight as to where the line should be drawn in the discrepancy between mentor and friend. Through these interviews, the researcher found that the teacher mentor must maintain his/her authority as a teacher and that the teacher must possess enough integrity and maturity to create a relationship wherein the student mentee understands that the teacher mentor is his/her teacher, not his/her
friend. If the teacher mentor becomes friends with the student mentee, the mentor loses authority and is not longer able to guide the student mentee as effectively. The teacher mentor must socially penetrate into the personal life of the student mentee and allow the student mentee to penetrate into his/her personal life while maintaining the authority of the teacher. This type of intimate relationship requires that the mentor be mature enough and have enough integrity to know how to maintain his/her authority. The student mentee must also be mature enough to realize that the teacher mentor cannot and should not be his/her friend. The student mentee must accept that the teacher mentor is there to guide and help them through his/her tumultuous adolescent years.

Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study centered on teachers in a Christian private school in the researcher’s area. Although the teachers varied in education, experience, and fields of study, the field of study was small. Also the demographics of the teachers only included white teachers; eight of these teachers work in a predominantly white school. Only teachers and ministers were interviewed in this study. Interviewing students who were being mentored by teachers would balance the information gathered more. The students would be able to identify what they felt they needed, in terms of intimacy, from a teacher mentor. The students could identify where or if they needed a boundary. They also could stipulate the need of a teacher mentor in their lives or why a teacher mentor was not needed.

Further Study or Recommendations

More studies need to be conducted in the area of teachers mentoring students and how teachers are to create successful mentor relationships while maintaining their authority. Studies
need to compare and contrast differences between teachers mentoring in private high schools versus teachers mentoring in public high schools. Also studies need to encompass more demographics in different areas of the country. Do teachers have more difficulty mentoring in rural areas versus urban areas? What are the challenges involved in male teachers mentoring female students and female teachers mentoring male students? These are important questions that could be answered by interviewing a larger sampling of teachers from different demographics.

Another factor that should be explored is the time it takes to effectively mentor a student. When a teacher teaches seven classes a day with thirty students in each class, is it even possible for a teacher to mentor a student? What are the ramifications for those students who desperately need a mentor and are unable to find or have one because their teachers are simply too busy? Are community organizations, such as Big Brother/Big Sisters able to fill that gap? These are questions that could be answered by interviewing or surveying other members of an adolescent’s community.

Conclusion

The mentor relationship has the potential to be very powerful and beneficial to both the mentor and mentee. In interviewing the successful mentorships and the teachers, the researcher heard many testimonies illustrating how teacher mentors were able to step into voids in the lives of student mentees and guide them through both hard times and good times. The results of this study indicate that the teacher mentor role goes beyond the role of a classroom teacher. The teacher mentor becomes more intimate in his/her social penetration into the life of his/her student mentee. The teacher mentor listens to and advises the student mentee in personal areas that the regular classroom teacher usually is not aware of. As a result, the teacher mentor must be mature enough to maintain his/her authority in order to guide the student mentee. The teacher mentor
must also be a person of integrity who focuses on the emotional and physical well being of the student and will not use his/her role as mentor as a means of harming the student in any way. The student mentee must be mature enough to understand and appreciate the role of the teacher mentor as an advisor and authority figure and not a friend or any other role that is more intimate.
References


