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Creating Opportunities with Mentoring Relationships

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Navigating the cultural environment of academia can be a difficult task, particularly for first-generation college students and those who belong to groups typically marginalized in doctoral programs. This study examines two cases of first-generation, African American female graduate students to determine which traits preclude success in doctoral programs and how mentoring relationships influence completion. The women in this study come from similar backgrounds, but they adopted very different strategies for coping with adversity. It is possible that the presence or absence of positive mentoring relationships in their lives influenced the strategies that the women chose. This article seeks to strengthen current evidence on the positive effects of mentoring on educational success and presents factors for mentors to consider when working with minority students.

Keywords: Mentoring, Relationships, First-Generation Students, African-American Women, Women as Learners

The impetus for this study came from an interview with Iresa Stubblefield-Jones for a chapter in *Empowering Women Through Literacy: Views from the Field* (Boden, 2009). During the interview, a recurring theme emerged – the importance that mentoring relationships played for Iresa. Clearly, her mentoring experiences altered the direction of her life and continued to have a positive impact on her years later. Questions emerged about the implications of cross-racial mentoring, the importance of mentoring for first-generation college students, how mentoring women may be different from mentoring men, and how to develop a model of practice that professors and advisors could use in virtually any graduate educational setting.

Method

The research questions were modeled from items from the Stubblefield-Jones interview (Boden, 2009) as well as literature reviewed within the subject area. The framework included research on women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986), transformative learning (Brookfield, 2001; Mezirow, 1997), women's development (Gilligan, 1982), the impact of the social and psychological environments on women as learners (Hall & Donaldson, 1997) adult students' knowledge voices (Kasworm, 2003), and cognitive development (Perry, 1968). The basic research questions were:

1. Have the participants in the study had significant mentoring experiences? If so, what did these experiences entail?
2. Were mentoring experiences particularly significant for first-generation college-students? If so, in what ways?
3. Did the participants in the sample have mentors that were of the same race, different races, or both? How did the variety of experiences compare?
4. What kinds of information gleaned through the interview can be utilized to build a model of mentoring best practices?

The interview protocol derived from the research questions. The scope and breadth of the interview questions were limited to participants' defining positive and negative educational and personal experiences in various settings, participants' perceptions of culture, support, and self, and participants' actions and strategies.

Participants for the two cases were Chloe*, age 51, and Marissa*, age 33 (pseudonyms). Both women are African American first-generation college students who chose to pursue a doctorate. The participants were identified through social networking and referral.

Discussion

Upon a cursory glance, the two individuals in the study appear to be very much alike in a variety of ways. Both women had similar backgrounds, coming from drug-filled and unsafe neighborhoods. Likewise, the environments in which they grew up contained expectations for early pregnancy. Both women attended poor-quality, segregated schools, wherein few of their teachers had acquired a college degree. After admission into their graduate programs, it appears that both women had equal access to mentoring opportunities. Based on these factors alone, one might assume that both individuals would be likely to share the same worldviews.

However, upon closer examination, there appears to be a myriad of factors that shaped each individual's worldview. When examining their differences, it appears that Chloe heard positive messages from a very early age about how an advanced degree may lead to a better quality of life. She had the direct support of her mother and an uncle who assisted and encouraged her in applying for college. Chloe also reported consistent messages from her mother about the appropriate ways to conduct oneself while in an educational setting. Marissa, on the other hand, had the same encouragement to attend college but received little familial support and assistance when applying for school. Marissa reflected on her experience, remembering that she had to do much of the research about college on her own. Marissa reported a lack of strong role models during her childhood, and she did not know anyone with an advanced degree that she could seek advice from when applying for her degree program.

A difference between the two cases is the contrasting life strategies that the women adopted when they experienced problems as undergraduate students. Although both individuals reported feelings of loneliness during college, Chloe exhibited various coping strategies including goal setting, positive self-talk, and intentionality in forming bonds with both peers and instructors. Marissa, though exhibiting a will to persevere, became increasingly distrustful of others, leading to an avoidance of mentoring and peer relationships in graduate school.

The two cases presented in this study reinforce previous findings in the mentoring literature. Dolan (2007) suggests that the mentoring process does have an impact on the success of women's growth and development while Castro, Caldwell, and Salazar (2005) suggest that mentoring experiences may have an effect on the mentee's life views. Certain attitudes and life strategies among graduate students may preclude success in a particular program. For example, a student who seems distrusting of others will be less likely to form bonds and take part in peer mentoring opportunities. Figure 1 demonstrates a comparison of positive and negative traits between the two cases.

African American graduate students may experience. This breadth of experience highlights individual differences that one may consider when creating a model of best practices.

It appears that in these two cases, the presence or lack of individual relationships with mentors was a contributing factor to the type of self-talk in which the participants engaged. Positive self-talk may allow students to better cope with stressful situations and may provide a refocusing of priorities – allowing the student to develop a positive attitude, an improved self-esteem, and an increased willingness to persevere. In productive mentoring relationships, positive self-talk appears to develop almost naturally. Constant encouragement from a mentor often leads to an adoption of seemingly automatic self-encouragement by the mentee.

It is important to note that while obvious, readily available access to mentors is an important factor in the pursuit of mentoring relationships, it is certainly not the only determinant. Student motivation also appears to play a vital role in persuading the student to seek and initiate mentoring relationships. Likewise, though an individual may be actively involved in mentoring opportunities, a determining factor in the beneficial result of the relationship appears to be the way in which a student chooses to integrate what she learned into her own life. Should the student continually ignore mentor advice, the student will likely view the mentoring opportunity as a waste of time.

In order for a mentoring relationship to succeed, there must be open communication between the mentor and the mentee. Relationships appear to be the most beneficial when the mentee is willing to ask questions and seek advice from her mentor. Mentors often provide insight into skills that extend beyond the classroom. Occasionally, these

skills include strategies for navigating around any items of “hidden curriculum” that may exist. Thus, it seems likely that open communication between both parties can foster a valuable learning environment that unveils cultural norms and expectations of which the student would be otherwise unaware.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that the presence of mentoring may help determine success for first-generation African American graduate students. Important mentoring experiences may occur during childhood, and many of the participants in this study identified their mother as being their first mentor. It seems that if there is an established pattern of mentoring early on, individuals may be more likely to seek mentors later in life, even after encountering negative educational experiences. This is an important piece of information for potential mentors to consider.

Formal, informal, and peer mentoring relationships can be factors related to success during graduate studies. It is a best practice for professors, program coordinators, and other individuals to provide both mentoring experiences and an environment conducive to peer mentoring.

The two cases presented in this study depict very different experiences with mentoring for two first-generation African American women during their doctoral studies. In the literature on mentoring and in this study, it is clear that a mentoring relationship can be an important factor in the success of the mentee. There are several factors that have an effect on the quality of the mentoring relationship, such as open communication, mutual commitment, and fluidity of roles and boundaries. In this study and in the literature, positive, solution-focused relationships with several mentors indeed made it possible for the mentee to “change the discourse” of her life.

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Figure 1: Comparison of Two Cases

	Chloe	Marissa
Response to Authority	+ Should be respected	- Should be distrusted
Teamwork	+ Encouraged	- Avoided, others will let you down
Mentoring Experience	+ A lot of mentoring in different environments	- Very few experiences, mostly avoided
Race Relations	+ Diversity respected	- Racism is pervasive
Family Relationships	+ Positive influence, seeks advice	- Negative influence, parents "don't understand"
World View	+ Assumes the best in others	- "Me vs. Them"
View of Self	+ Confident, willing to ask questions	- Self-esteem relies on others, should not ask for help
View of Peers	+ Valuable resources, one should learn from their experiences	- Will attempt to "sabotage" you, better "on your own"
Interpersonal Relationships	+ Attempts to form many bonds, tries to influence others positively	- Only forms bonds with like individuals, seen as a negative influence
Approach to Problems	+ Problem Solving, action-oriented	- Problem Dwelling, gives up easily
Work Environment View	+ A wonderful way to mentor others, always "smile" on the job	- A source of stress, feels overworked, not a "team player"
General Outlook	+ Optimistic, always seeking new opportunities	- "Glass half empty," expressed inner resentment and negativity

Dr. Carrie J. Boden McGill joined the UALR faculty in 2007 and currently serves as an Associate Professor of Adult Education and Program Coordinator for the Master's Degree in Adult Education. Dr. Boden McGill teaches a variety of courses including: Foundations of Adult Education, Psychology of Adult Learning, Program Planning in Adult Education, Internship in Adult Education, Organization and Administration of Adult Education, Methods and Materials in Adult Education, Teaching Adults, and several seminar courses.

Dr. Boden McGill holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Adult Education from Kansas State University, M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Wichita State University, and B.A. in English Language and Literature from Bethel College. Her memberships include the Arkansas Association for Continuing and Adult Education, Adult Higher Education Alliance, American Association of Adult and Continuing Education, and Women Expanding Literacy Education Action Resource Network. Dr. Boden McGill serves as a Member-at-Large for the Commission of Professors of Adult Education and as a Director on the Board of the Adult Higher Education Alliance.

Dr. Boden McGill's research is primarily in the areas of self-directed learning, personal epistemology, transformative learning, and teaching and learning strategies. Recent publications and presentations focus on the mentoring experiences of graduate students, the effects of mindfulness practices on personal epistemological beliefs, and various methodologies that can be implemented in distance education and classroom settings. Dr. Boden McGill's book on transformative learning, co-edited with Dr. Sola Kippers, will be published in 2011.

Dr. Boden McGill has an interest in international education, and she recently participated in a faculty exchange program with Karl-Franzens Universität in Graz, Austria. She has also been on the planning committees for several international conferences and serves as an Associate Editor for The International Journal of Learning. She has coordinated a Sister Cities International Exchange with La Salle University in Cancun, Mexico, traveled to South America as a Fulbright Scholar with Project ECHO, and participated in the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, China.