



Extending the Culture of Mentoring to Support Learning and Identity Development of Culturally Diverse College Students

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Abstract

Exposure to mentoring has been cited as a powerful means to enhance college students' academic and professional identity development. In particular, having a mentor can influence students' feelings of belonging in and identification with academic environments. Existing research and theories on mentoring students in higher education suggest the need to study culturally diverse students who collaborate with mentors, including the effects on their persistence. There is also a need to broaden our understanding of the knowledge, experiences, and histories that students bring to their learning process. A culture-based paradigm shift in mentoring college students is needed due to the limited accounts of culture and the context in student learning and development. Building on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Paris's concept of culturally sustaining pedagogies, and the Rhodes' theory for mentoring at-risk students, this paper addresses the role that the sociocultural background plays in mentoring underrepresented and underserved students. I discuss culturally sustaining pedagogies and assisted discovery practices as promising approaches and strategies for mentoring culturally diverse students. Theoretical and practical concepts for extending the culture of mentoring practices for students' learning and identity development are also discussed.

Keywords: Mentoring, Sociocultural Background, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies, Assisted Discovery Practices, Culturally Diverse Students

1. Introduction

Several scholars re-addressed the issues pertaining persistence and learning opportunities for culturally diverse students and offered new insights how culture and the context form a unique foundation for student learning and identity development. This paper addresses the role that the student sociocultural background plays in learning and identity development of underrepresented and underserved student mentees. I discuss the ways in which mentors can better support those students in exploring their own identities and assist them in developing healthy cultural and academic identities.

2. The Role of Sociocultural Background in Student Learning and Identity Development

Identity is a social construct, shaped by both self and others [1] and within different social, community, and institutional contexts. Because of the relational aspect of identity development, student identity is ever-evolving and constantly re-written; identities intersect and interact with one another and create unique experiences for students to develop a sense of integration and coherence among multiple identities [2]. Because the phenomenon of identity is so culturally and contextually situated, student sociocultural background should be the forefront in effectively supporting learning and identity development of underrepresented students.

Vygotsky's [3] Sociocultural Theory proposes that development is mediated by culture and social interactions. Students learn and develop through interactions with others in collaborative and cooperative learning environments. Learning involves collaboration between students and "More Knowledgeable Others" (MKO), such as mentors, as they engage in the learning process. Vygotsky also introduced The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the area between students' levels of independent performances (what students can do or know without help) and the students' levels of assisted performances (what students can do or know with support). Specifically, learning and identity development of students may be enhanced when students collaborate with more capable and experienced others, such as mentors.

3. Mentoring Culturally Diverse Students in Higher Education

Mentoring is seen as a means of fostering less experienced individual's (mentee's) growth through the assistance of a more experienced individual (mentor) [4]. Mentoring relationships are uniquely

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positioned to help college students with their academic, professional, and socioemotional transitions and development. Rhodes [5] introduced a theory for mentoring at-risk students, including those from culturally diverse backgrounds. She proposed that quality mentoring supports mentees' (a) socioemotional development through open conversation, (b) cognitive skills through exposure to different opportunities and scaffolding techniques, and (c) identity development through role modeling and advocating. Additionally, Paris [6] introduced culturally sustaining pedagogies as learning and teaching practices that support students in sustaining the cultural competence of their home communities while simultaneously providing access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining approach to mentoring, then, centers on the ways in which mentees are enacting ethnicity and cultural practices in both traditional and evolving ways. Mentoring practices that employ both culturally specific and pluralistic teaching approaches may enhance learning and identity development of underrepresented student mentees.

Given these propositions, I now discuss practical implications for creating culturally sustaining and supportive mentoring environments. These include (a) student-centered discovery approach to mentoring, (b) academic and professional guidance, and (c) culturally sensitive support.

3.1 Student-Centered Discovery Approach to Mentoring

Mentees' experiences and prior knowledge must play a role in how mentors approach to assist and mentor underrepresented students. Mentors are expected to discover for each individual student *what* is it that they need out of a particular mentoring relationship and *how* to support this student. Student-centered guided mentoring provides multiple opportunities for mentees to explore and discover their imagined possible futures [6] and assists them in developing identities and possible selves [5]. Mentors must learn how their mentees' sociocultural backgrounds influence their learning, including the knowledge and experiences students bring to their education. Utilizing mentees' interests and prior knowledge as well as the ways of knowing from mentees' home communities into the learning process help students discover their traditional and evolving identities. Exposing mentees to multiple pathways and mapping these pathways individually help students find what they are truly passionate (or not passionate) about.

Mentors should also understand how their mentees' sociocultural backgrounds influence or may have influence their expectations and background knowledge of *what is success* and *how to succeed* in a particular environment. Mentors are, then, expected to sustain respect for the integrity of student's cultural knowledge and beliefs and create opportunities to make meaningful connections among other knowledge systems and beliefs. Learning opportunities for students to contribute to their communities enhances underrepresented students' growth, including senses of purpose, self-worth, and decision making [7, 8].

3.2 Proactive Academic Assistance and Professional Guidance

Mentors are expected to serve as sources of academic and professional guidance and advocate on behalf of their mentees. Engaging mentees in hands-on learning activities and projects where they can work independently yet, with the mentor's assistance, helps the mentees develop senses of self-authorship. Experiencing control over learning experiences fosters students' senses of ownership of their educational destinies, helps them become more self-directed, and increases their persistence in college [8]. Scaffolding the mentoring process and providing a concrete and tangible feedback, help mentees monitor their own progress and performance and support successful connections between the known and new information. Specifically, mentors are expected to provide assistance that is just beyond what the mentees can do alone or scaffold the mentoring process by changing the nature of support and guidance over time, as do the mentees' needs and skills [9]. Mentors should continually look forward to what it is that their mentees need, what they are interested about, and what goals they have and provide feedback and guidance according to these needs and goals.

Mentors are expected to provide academic and professional support and resources for overcoming the challenges that culturally diverse often students face [4], such as feelings of isolation [2] or incomplete information about college [10]. Providing useful information and advising students about different opportunities that exist for them, such as applying for a master's or doctoral program or for a scholarship, can help mentees navigate their current and future studies. Informing students about different opportunities for professional development, such as presenting at professional conferences or internships, can foster students' social networking and clarify their career aspirations. Organizing mentor-mentee workshops and trainings as a group or one-on-one interactions where mentors assist mentees in writing their resumes or cover letters help them learn professional development skills and contributes to their future careers.



3.3 Culturally Sensitive Support

Culturally sensitive mentors effectively combine the academic knowledge with students' traditional knowledge and experiences [11]. Culturally relevant activities help mentees to explore their identities and use their cultural backgrounds as strengths [8]. Mentoring students from more collectivistic cultural backgrounds may focus on enhancing these students' sense of belonging and relatedness. Conversely, mentoring students from more individualistic cultural backgrounds might be used as a means to support these students' senses of competence and independence [12]. Culturally-inclusive collaborations between mentors and mentees, such as focusing on conversations, open-mindedness, and creativity help establish an authentic culture of caring in the mentoring process [7]. Open discussions about ethnicity, race, and privilege can enhance both mentors' and mentees' mutual understanding of cultural diversity [11]. Exchange of experiences and ideas can foster mentors' and students' senses of their own places and purposes within the larger educational and social context [7, 8]. Such nurturing and culturally healthy mentoring relationships help underrepresented students develop cultural and academic identities without the loss of their traditional knowledge and values [11]. Mentors can strengthen their mentees' identification with their disciplines and ethnicities by exposing their students to relevant (or additional) role models or members of their home communities. Role modeling enhances underserved students' senses of shared experiences, feelings of belonging, and academic and social integration [8]. Co-ethnic social relationships, including mentoring interactions, may allow for a better understanding of the needs of culturally diverse students, as co-ethnic faculty, near peers (i.e., master's or doctoral students) and other community members are likely to encounter similar challenges related to those students' cultural status. Additionally, the co-ethnic others often play a role of cultural brokers and assist in transmitting the students' knowledge and values into the learning process [2]. These experiences enhance student engagement, enrich the learning process as a whole, including institutional practices of teaching, and therefore, establish a cornerstone for identity development of culturally diverse students, especially for those from indigenous backgrounds [7, 8].

4. Final Thoughts

This paper affirms the notion that culturally sustaining practices in mentoring can make higher educational institutions more comfortable and safe environments for underrepresented students. Widening the scope of mentoring and familial capital and increasing their value by society as a whole would benefit culturally diverse students to discover and develop healthy cultural and academic identities. It is this sort of spirit that can extend the culture of mentoring practices toward more culture-based approach to learning and teaching and therefore, toward social justice, inclusion, and cultural sustainability for the present and future age.

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