

EXPLORING MENTORS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS MENTORING AS A PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This is qualitative study aimed to investigate the experiences of mentors and study their perceptions based on their experiences in mentoring in-service teachers for conducting school based action research as a part of a major research project funded by the UGC on "Promoting Action Research for Continuing Professional Development among In-service Teachers through the Mentorship Model" during the period 2015-2018. This study aimed at exploring the various factors underlying the process of mentoring through mentor perceptions. The study also contributes to an understanding of different mentors and mentee experiences, relationships and the mentors' perceptions on the challenges and benefits of the mentoring process. The findings of this study revealed certain practical challenges and also provided several valuable insights into process of mentoring thus widening the scope of designing quality mentorship interventions or programs in the future.

INTRODUCTION

"Fit and chemistry must be considered when pairing the mentor and the protégé. If the two don't get along, it matters little what each can offer the other in terms of knowledge and skills."

**-Michael Zey, Building a
Successful Formal Mentor Program**

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This paper is a part of this UGC funded project on "Promoting Action Research for Continuing Professional Development among In-service Teachers through the Mentorship Model" during the period 2015-2018. It is a qualitative study aimed to investigate the experiences of the mentors and study their perceptions based on their experiences in mentoring in-service teachers across different cohorts to carry out school based action research. Mentoring was the most important process that underlined the project

MENTORING

The term 'mentoring' itself comes from a Greek word meaning 'enduring'. The word Mentor evolved to mean trusted advisor, friend, teacher and wise person. Some of the definitions of

mentoring are: "Mentoring is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be." Eric Parsloe, The Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring.

"Mentoring involves listening with empathy, sharing experience (usually mutually), professional friendship, developing insight through reflection, being a sounding board, and encouraging." - David Clutterbuck.

In this study the mentoring was for a fixed purpose. The mentor had to handhold the mentee to develop understanding, skills and confidence to conduct an action research study. The development of the mentee is the key focus. Typically the mentor and mentee met at designated times and places to discuss issues; make plans to resolve and then review. The mentors in this project anchored the mentoring process on the GROW model. The GROW model provided a framework and direction to mentors in the mentoring facilitation process.

MENTORING WITH GROW MODEL.

'Performance, learning and enjoyment are inextricably intertwined' - Sir John Whitmore

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The GROW model of coaching has been designed by Sir John Whitmore and is central to his best-selling book 'Coaching for Performance'. It is particularly useful when new to mentoring as it provides a framework within which to hold mentoring conversations that enables mentor and mentee to: Ensure the time is being spent on mentees' goals, that goals are explored, Mentee's self-awareness and awareness is raised. Solutions, actions and activities are agreed and there is commitment from your mentee to progress their development. GROW is an acronym for the following series of words: 1) GOAL (What is the desired outcome?) REALITY (What is currently happening?) OPTIONS (What could you do?) WILL (What will you do?)

PROCEDURE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Mentors in the present study were chosen from a repertoire of research experts who were well equipped with research skills. They were capable of mentoring the novice teacher researchers in the undertaken project. Each mentor was assigned 4 to 5 mentees for each cohort. These mentees were in-service teachers from various schools who had enrolled as participants for the project. The mentors were expected to guide the participants in the process of conducting action research in their schools. Right from identifying an issue, framing objectives to conducting an intervention program and writing the final report, the mentors were engaged all along with their respective mentees.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study was to explore the factors underlying the process of mentoring based on the perceptions of the mentors using the GROW model.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS THAT GUIDED THE STUDY

Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What were the experiences of the mentors in the process of mentoring different cohorts of mentees?

2. What were the challenges encountered by the mentors in the process of mentoring?
3. What factors did the mentors perceive as promoting or hindering the process of mentoring?
4. What kind of relationships did the mentors experience with their mentees?
5. How did the mentoring process benefit the mentees?

SAMPLE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

Ten Teacher educators from the parent institution and other institutions who served as mentors in the three year period to mentor the in-service teachers conducting action research projects in their respective schools under the UGC Major Research project.

DATA COLLECTION

A qualitative approach was used for understanding the experiences regarding the mentoring process. The data was collected through questionnaires and follow up interviews.

TOOL FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

A questionnaire was prepared for the study and follow up interviews were conducted keeping in mind the research questions to be answered. A few of them are stated below: How would you describe the quality of your experience as a mentor in the program? Do you think your mentees benefitted from your mentorship? What is the most beneficial change you identified in yourself as a result of your mentorship? What was least satisfying about the mentor program?

FINDINGS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The responses were read carefully and analyzed by the research team. The findings from the responses to the questionnaire and follow up interviews are summarized under different themes that emerged from the data.

COMMUNICATION

Communication between Mentor and mentee was through two ways broadly: face to face and through the use of technology. Mentors reported

that the first session was always formally organized at a workshop where the mentors met their mentees and tried to understand what the mentee is inclined to work on as her or his topic. It helped to build rapport and set the tone for further communication.

After the initial meeting it was more informal and use of phone calls, emails and WhatsApp helped. Communication mode for the mentoring process largely depended on the mentees' convenience and comfort. One of the mentors reported that Skype helped to effectively communicate with the mentor and facilitation become more real. Overall, the sense that came from the data indicates that the frequency of face to face communication between the mentors and the mentees was less than required and a few more meetings could have resulted in a more committed, engaging process of mentoring. They also said that regularity in communication led to better outcomes.

MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

Regarding the shared relationships between the mentors and the mentees, it was found that a few of the mentees were highly enthusiastic and proactive and hence contacted their mentors quite regularly. This facilitated better relationships for both mentor and the mentee. Some of the mentees seemed too pressurized by the project related work and developed much anxiety during the process. This resulted in avoiding communication with their mentors and eventually they sometimes distanced from their mentors. In this regard, the mentors perceived that the school teachers were already too burdened with school work and school activities and found it difficult to find time for research. overall they had a good warm relationship with their mentee.

TIME AS A FACTOR

The mentors felt that timing of the mentoring is an important factor that affects teacher interest. In the last two cohorts (Dec – March 2018) due to year end demands and heavy schedule work output was not up to standards. Mentors felt time was a major constraint across all cohorts that hindered the teacher participants' work progress

in their projects. Completion of syllabus, correction of notebooks, setting exam papers, correcting exam papers, making reports, dealing with all extra-curricular aspects, and many other administrative duties assigned by school and sometimes Govt. demands left teachers with less time to focus on projects that were not a part of their routine. Also the fact that schools which encouraged teachers did not sometimes provide any support in terms of extra time, space or recognition to carry out the project. This could have led to low motivation among the mentees. Mentors voiced out their own indisposition towards mentoring such mentees who had very low levels of motivation. Constant low motivation in mentees discouraged mentors too.

MOTIVATION AS A FACTOR

The mentors perceived that the school authorities, (Principal, Supervisor or the Management) played a key role in enrolling their teachers for action research project and successfully completing the same. External factors such as certification, recognition of doing research in an UGC project motivated many of the teacher participants in completing the projects with the continued assistance of their mentors. The mentors felt schools did their best to enroll their teachers, were encouraging overtly but they did not give real tangible concessions like a specific slot within timetable to carry out the experiment, it was left to the teachers to find out how they will complete their load as well as make time for action research. Competency was also another factor identified. Mentors said that those teachers who were competent, intelligent, picked up the ideas faster. This motivated them to seek mentors help more regularly.

BENEFITS FOR THE MENTOR

With respect to their own benefits in the course of mentoring, most of the mentors recounted their experience as very enriching in terms of expanding their horizons of knowledge, versatile in terms of ability to guide in languages other than English, insightful in terms of becoming aware about the grass root problems of schools and

harsh realities of school. The happiness or feeling of satisfaction to lead another individual to success in the area of research was rewarding for the mentors. They said the mentoring process made them very reflective and responsible.

INCENTIVES

Mentors indicated that mentoring is a serious and committed process that requires giving one's valuable time. They said they worked knowing there was no remuneration but it is unrealistic to assume that mentoring is free service. All mentors strongly felt that remuneration is important and accountability increases with this.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A very important factor that underpinned the success of mentor-mentee relationship and achievement in Action research was teacher motivation. Mentors' disappointment over low motivation of some mentees across different cohorts also corroborates with other research studies. A study of the relationship of roles of the mentor with the mentor's characteristics by Mullen, (1998) showed that mentors who had their protégé influence them, who perceived their protégés as competent, and who spent more time with their protégés were identified as serving mentoring functions at the greatest level. Congruent with the findings of this study, the present study also reveals that the same view that time, competency of the mentee is important in the mentoring process. Low motivation of mentees and less time spent with mentor emerged as significant factors in the mentoring process. A study by Douglas (1997) suggests that participation by mentors and mentees should be voluntary and comments that if 'participation is not perceived as voluntary, the effectiveness of the initiative will be diminished by participant resistance' (p. 97). This finding is supportive of the causes of decreased motivation of the mentees in the present study. In the course of fulfilling the school's expectations by enrolling for the project, the mentees' participation may not have been necessarily voluntary. Regarding the motivation level of teacher participants the researchers felt that if the school had certain

expectations from their teachers on a project, then the school may necessarily set aside some time specifically assigned for that kind of project.

Recommendations from a study of a review of mentoring in education by Lisa, et al., (2002), suggests that sufficient personal and financial investment in the mentoring program is necessary in order to ensure that mentors have sufficient training, time, energy, and resources to effectively and enthusiastically carry out their role. In agreement with this finding, researchers in the present study also felt that probably some kind of incentive if provided to the mentors would have been helpful in boosting their motivation and increased accountability on the whole. The fact that this project did not support any kind of remuneration for mentors could have led to reduced levels of motivation at times from the mentors too. Also it's difficult to maintain accountability when it is a voluntary job and mentors spare their valuable time for the mentoring process without availing any kind of benefits for themselves. The notion that mentoring, teaching, coaching is an altruistic action should necessarily not merit monetary benefits is very strong in Indian society. That is one of the reasons the UGC also did not support the funding for mentors even though it was budgeted for.

Though this study was limited to a small sample of mentors in a specific context; the mentors had varied experience in nurturing their mentees, over a long three year study (2015-18) across several cohorts of training. This ensured rich and authentic data and the findings will be extremely useful in designing Mentoring intervention and Mentor based programs and can also be considered as a potential for further in-depth studies on mentorship process and its impact on learning and training.

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