Palestinian Novice Teachers' Perception of a Good Mentor

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ABSTRACT   *The perceptions of 40 novice Palestinian teachers about the attributes of a good mentor are examined. Data from structured and semi-structured in-depth interviews provided findings which were analyzed qualitatively to determine the themes generated by the responses of the participants. Results of the study showed that Palestinian teachers do not differ significantly from their colleagues in other countries, although certain cultural variables tend to influence this perception. The results are discussed in terms of their relevance to mentoring in general.*

INTRODUCTION

Although the term 'mentor' has appeared in the literary and professional literature since ancient times, its formal application in the realm of education is a relatively new phenomenon. Further, an examination of contemporary literature suggests that mentoring has captured the interest of professionals such as educators (Daresh, 1995), business managers (Bernstein & Kay, 1986), and psychologists (Torrance, 1984). More important, however, formal mentoring programs in education have been implemented and discussed extensively in English-speaking societies such as the USA, UK, and Australia (Ashby & Krug, 1995; Ballantyne *et al.*, 1995; Jones *et al.*, 1997). These educational researchers have focused their attention on the personal and professional qualities and attributes that make mentors effective.

Although investigators have delineated many profiles of the ideal mentor, their descriptions appear to fit within a few parameters such as interpersonal characteristics, personality, age, gender, and experience (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Clowson & Kram, 1984; Corbett & Wright, 1993). The nature of these findings suggests that some of these attributes (e.g. gender) may be culture-specific rather than universal. Hence, a wider scope of research endeavor is needed to determine the extent to which these attributes are universal or culture-specific. Unfortunately, the professional literature on this subject

matter demonstrates extreme paucity when applied to non-anglophone societies. To what extent novice teachers' perception of a good mentor within Asian, African, and other similar societies is congruent with the perception of their anglophone colleagues remains a point of conjecture. This research project was an effort designed to remedy this deficiency. Given that the study population for this study is Palestinian, it is imperative to provide the reader with an overview of Palestinian education and society.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 on the land of historical Palestine, and the ensuing dispersion of the Palestinians throughout the world, has fragmented Palestinian society. Although Palestinians living on Israeli-occupied Palestinian land (West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem) since 1967 were subjected to educational systems or governance other than their own (e.g. British, Jordanian, and Israeli), they were afforded the opportunity to establish their own educational system in 1994. Given that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (the population for this study) inherited an educational system in demise, Palestinian educators have been seeking innovative methods to improve the competence of their poorly paid, poorly trained, and poorly equipped teachers, especially novice ones. The use of mentoring as one tool to achieve this end was worthy of consideration. Unfortunately, Palestinian educators do not know if the mentoring process will be perceived by their novice teachers in the same manner as their colleagues in anglophone societies. This study aims to shed light on this question and also hopes to enrich the literature on the universal and culture-specific attributes of a good mentor.

METHOD

Population

The population of this study consisted of all (N = 396) newly appointed governmental male and female teachers in the Nablus District of the West Bank. Newly appointed teachers were selected because the available research has shown that this population struggles the most in their beginning years of experience in order to master the skills necessary for effective classroom control and efficacy (Howey, 1988).

Sample

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 10% (N = 40) of the target population according to gender and qualification (two-year diploma, bachelor degree). The names of the newly appointed teachers were divided into the following four groups: (a) two-year diploma males; (b) two-year diploma females; (c) bachelor degree males; and (d) bachelor degree females. The random selection yielded a sample comparable to the population as can be shown in Table 1.

Ten additional names were selected for contingency purposes (attrition and refusal to participate). Given that interviews were the basic research tool used in this study, the sample size not only was sufficient, but probably to be also preferred (Best, 1977).

TABLE 1. Distribution of sample according to gender and
Qualification

Qualification	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Bachelor degree	14	12	26
	(138)	(120)	(258)
Two-Year diploma	9	5	14
	(84)	(54)	(138)
Total	(23)	(17)	(40)
	(222)	(174)	(396)

Note: the numbers in parentheses reflect the population
distribution.

Research Tool

Given that no exact Arabic equivalent could be found for the term 'mentor', and the topic
under examination dealt basically with attitudes, feelings, and perceptions, it was decided
that guided structured and semi-structured interviews could serve as the research tool of
choice for the purposes of this study. This decision was based on Gehrke's (1988)
assessment for determining sample size when qualitative techniques are primarily used in
the analysis of the data. Hence, a structured interview guide consisting of three main
sections was constructed to tap the perceptions of novice teachers regarding the character-
istics and role(s) of a good mentor. The first section was devoted to demographic
characteristics (e.g. gender, qualifications, and subject area), while section two targeted the
novice teachers' perceptions of a mentor's personal characteristics (e.g. social status,
gender, age, and qualifications), preferred venue for interaction, desired disposition and
attributes, and the duration of the mentoring period. Section three contained two para-
graphs designed to elaborate on the novice teachers' perception of the desired professional
attributes and role(s) of a mentor. While paragraph one focused on the expected role and
function of the mentor (e.g. organizer, facilitator, advisor, supporter, role model, etc.), the
second paragraph dealt with domains of assistance novice teachers felt they were in need
of to maintain discipline, deal with curriculum problems, and develop teaching techniques
and strategies. The interview guide was then reviewed and critiqued by five specialists in
the field to ascertain its content validity. The interview procedure was pilot-tested on ten
novice teachers not included in the sample to ascertain its validity. Modifications to the
interview procedure (e.g. duration, clarification of educational terminology, and establish-
ment of rapport) were made to alleviate the problem areas that surfaced during the
pilot-testing phase.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in Arabic by a female graduate student in education within
a variety of settings (classrooms, teachers' lounge, and work areas). Each interview lasted

45–60 minutes, and all the interviews were completed within a two-month period. No data were collected prior to establishing rapport and trust with the interviewees. This was accomplished by being candid with the interviewees and reassuring them that the purpose of the research was not to evaluate their performance, but to gain a better understanding of their needs, attitudes, and perceptions towards mentoring. The interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed when permission was granted. Otherwise, the sessions were transcripted. Following the establishment of rapport and trust, the interviewer gave a general overview of the research project, its purpose, and how it could benefit the interviewee. Furthermore, the term 'mentor' was clarified to the interviewee according to adaptations from the suggestions of Meriam (1983) and Bova and Phillips (1984). The interviewer then followed the interview guide and previously tested procedure.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was conducted according to the procedures of grounded theory research. Following the transcription of the interviews, the raw data were arranged in text units, and were then analyzed using qualitative inductive methods based on open codes, emerging themes, and emerging categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The emerging codes were then arranged into themes that were based on the converging responses of a number of participants to minimize the effects of personality and other individual differences, thus leading to the identification of common patterns.

FINDINGS

Although an extensive interview guide was utilized and followed in order to facilitate and generate an abundance of data, the findings showed that the responses of nearly one-fourth (12/40) of the interviewees did not generate the in-depth information sought. In other words, the production of these respondents can best be described as impoverished. Several factors may have contributed to this outcome. Although the setting (teachers' lounge, interruptions) in which the interviews were conducted at times may have played a role in this outcome, apprehension that the Ministry of Education may not look with favor on novice teachers criticizing it could also have contributed to this hesitancy. Finally, some teachers did not respond as hoped simply because they were not interested. Consequently, the findings depicted in this section are based on the responses of the 28 novice teachers who provided comprehensive and penetrating responses.

Perceived Academic/Professional and Personal Attributes of a Good Mentor

The general response of the novice teachers showed that they possessed built-in stereotypes regarding the individual(s) with whom they wish to interact in school. The interviewees appeared to hold a general consensus regarding their perception of the professional, academic, and personal attributes they desired in a mentor.

Academic/Professional Attributes

Nearly all (95%) of the respondents expressed a desire to have a mentor who specializes in the subject areas they teach. This finding is not surprising in light of the novice teachers' expressed need for assistance in teaching their subject areas. As a music teacher commented: 'How can a teacher of religion help me in teaching music? We do not have anything in common.' The insistence on having a mentor of the same academic background did not apply to the grade the mentor teaches. The interviewees were divided on the issue of the same grade attribute in terms of supporters (N = 16), nonsupporters (N = 5), and being indifferent (N = 7). The findings also showed that novice teachers have certain preferences if no grade match could be achieved. Novice teachers were inclined to accept mentors who teach grades higher rather than lower than the grades they teach, provided their mentor is affiliated with the same school. Novice teachers were not supportive of having mentors who teach in higher education for fear that the experience gap will hinder rather than facilitate interaction between them.

The novice teachers also expressed general consensus (92%) that a mentor should possess a graduate degree (basically Master) and considerable expertise in her/his field of specialization. The respondents also placed special importance on mentors possessing expertise in teaching methodology, as articulated by one of the novice teachers: 'What I need is somebody to show me how to convince fourth-grade students that four multiplied by three is equivalent to three multiplied by four.' The novice teachers also held similar perceptions regarding the optimal number of years of experience mentors should have. Nearly three-fourths of them believed that mentors should have a minimum of five years of experience compared to one-fourth who felt that mentors should have ten years of experience. None of the respondents felt that novice teachers could serve as mentors. This was expressed unequivocally by one of the respondents: 'If they lack experience, they should be protégés and not mentors.'

Personal Attributes

Perceived personal attributes of a good mentor were analyzed in terms of gender, age, and disposition. Interviewees displayed clear differences in terms of their mentors' preferred gender. While the overwhelming majority (13/15) of male respondents preferred mentors of the same gender, less than one-third (5/13) of the female respondents preferred to have female mentors. The majority (8/13) of them did not display gender preference. It is interesting to note, however, that only one (male) respondent preferred a mentor of the opposite gender. These differences were expressed clearly in the statements of the respondents. A male novice teacher articulated his preference in the statement: 'When I need help, I will ask an experienced, wise colleague. I will not rush to seek the help of a woman.' By contrast, a female novice teacher stated: 'We are used to male supervisors. How should this be different?'

The perception of novice teachers regarding the preferred age of a mentor showed that the overwhelming majority (22/28) felt that the mentor should be 5–10 years or older than the protégé. Only a small minority felt that age is not significant (3/28), or should be the same

(3/28). No respondent felt that the mentor should be younger than the protégé. In other words, novice teachers felt that the mentor should be a middle-aged colleague rather than from the same age group. This perception, as will be discussed later, is largely related to the correlation between experience and age.

Nearly all novice teachers, irrespective of gender, were in consensus regarding the disposition of the mentor. A good mentor was perceived as one who is genuine, giving, and shows interest in the professional growth of the protégé. It is also worthy to note that sense of humor was a frequently mentioned preferred attribute in a mentor. 'No one likes to deal with a serious person who only laughs occasionally', one novice teacher stated. Furthermore, the mentor should be honest, forgiving, and fair. Finally, novice teachers felt that mentors should be patient and tactful, as one respondent stated: 'I do not want a mentor who discusses things with me in public. I need a mentor who is always there, but who maintains a distance to allow me my personal space.'

Communication skills were also mentioned as necessary to a good mentoring relationship. The interviewees felt that a mentor should be a good listener and an articulate speaker. These skills, the respondents felt, should be practiced in an atmosphere of respect, modesty, and humbleness. Novice teachers showed clear aversion to mentors who are 'bossy'.

DISCUSSION

Any discussion of the findings must be grounded within the context that formal mentoring is an alien concept to Palestinian educators. Although the novice teachers were familiar with the concept of mentoring at the onset of the interviews, it remains unclear whether the perceptions they formulated regarding mentoring were congruent with those portrayed in the professional literature. The findings, however, seem to show that the perception of Palestinian novice teachers regarding mentoring does not deviate radically from what the professional literature on the subject matter demonstrates. The degree of congruence will be discussed according to preferred academic/professional and personal attributes of a good mentor.

Palestinian novice teachers favored mentors who are qualified, experienced, and affiliated with their schools. This perception may be attributed to several factors. The interview process did show that Palestinian novice teachers were similar to other novice teachers in terms of their apprehensions and concerns: i.e. ability to function, manage, and excel in their profession. Hence it is reasonable to assume that novice teachers prefer mentors who are able to provide them with the needed assistance at the proper time. Their academic needs, therefore, could be served best by having a mentor who is qualified, experienced, and who remains within close proximity. It is not unusual, therefore, that Palestinian novice teachers preferred mentors who are their seniors by more than a decade. It is clear here that the novice teachers equated age with experience. Furthermore, Palestinian-Arab culture equates age with respect, reverence, and wisdom. Finally, acceptance of a mentor equal or junior in age carries the implicit acknowledgement of one's inferior competence.

These results do not deviate appreciably from the characteristics of mentors elsewhere. Wright and Bottery (1997), for example, have shown that mentors in England are attached to the institution of the novice teacher, are very experienced (83% have 11 years of experience or more), and nearly two-thirds (63.4%) are 41 years of age or older.

This perception could also be explained by the novice teachers' unwillingness to seek help from formal (e.g. principal or supervisor) school agents. Tellez (1992) noted similar results in his study on American novice teachers, although the literature on this issue is equivocal (see, e.g., Gehrke & Kay, 1984). Furthermore, the choice of an experienced colleague as a mentor may be born out of the novice teacher's apprehension that one of the functions of formal school agents is to evaluate them. Palestinian novice teachers displayed reactions on this dimension similar to those of novice teachers within other settings; they perceived a good mentor as being nonjudgemental (Jones & Ohara, 1995; Southworth, 1995).

Palestinian novice teachers varied in their perceptions in terms of gender expectations and roles. Although none of the female novice teachers opted to have a male mentor, they neither rejected the notion nor were astonished by its proposition. Although male novice teachers also preferred mentors of the same gender, they displayed immense difficulty in entertaining the notion that their mentor would be female. This finding could be interpreted within bio-socio-cultural explanations. Although the literature (Kenrick *et al*., 1996) on the evolutionary relationship between men and women suggests that women tend to seek older and powerful men, socio-cultural variables could provide equally, if not more, convincing explanations. Palestinian society is considered conventional, tribal, and patriarchal; and, as such, women tend to be perceived as having a lower status than men. Hence it is not surprising to note that men novice teachers experienced difficulty in conceiving or accepting women as their mentors. Female novice teachers, on the other hand, did not scoff at the suggestion that they have a male mentor. Living in a patriarchal society acculturates females at a young age to accept that they need the protection and guidance of their male counterparts. Upheld religious beliefs and values also tend to reinforce this interpretation. Finally, very few women hold high-ranking positions in education, thus limiting the pool of choice mostly to men.

Palestinian novice teachers did not deviate in their perceptions of the interpersonal skills of a good mentor from what has been revealed in the literature. It appears that good communication skills, patience, sensitivity, tact, trust, and ability to maintain confidentiality are universal characteristics protégés expect from their mentors, but, perhaps, for different cultural reasons (Thornton, 1996). For example, although confidentiality may be valued in Euro-American societies for professional reasons, Arab society may value it for cultural ones. It is imperative in Arab and other Asian and African societies to maintain personal shortcomings at the private level. Hence, while Euro-American novice teachers advocate confidentiality based on professional ethics, Asian-African novice teachers will advocate it for cultural reasons. Cultural variables also may have played a role in the perceived functions of a good mentor.

Jones *et al.* (1997) have delineated the functions of a good mentor to include the development of strong psychosocial bonds between mentor and protégé. This component

appears to be absent in the responses of Palestinian novice teachers. Their perception of a good mentor's function is limited to the career rather than personal domain. Mentors were perceived as teachers, sponsors, role models, and developers of talents, but not necessarily as friends. Hence, their perceived function is to perform specific tasks and not to develop interpersonal relationships. It is difficult in Arab-Palestinian society for teachers and other professionals to develop strong interpersonal relationships between colleagues of different genders. Such relationships are generally limited to within-gender social interactions to preempt the evolution of rumors and innuendoes. The characteristics Palestinian novice teachers desired from a mentor may also not deviate from what mentors in the west believe their function to be (see, e.g., Wright & Bottery, 1997). Although Palestinian novice teachers wished to limit their interaction with their mentors to the academic and educational domains for cultural reasons, English mentors focused on these domains because they felt they posed a major challenge to novice teachers, not because cultural factors hinder personal interaction between individuals of differing genders. On the contrary, English mentors aspire for close relationships with their students, as Jones *et al.* (1997) have shown. The teaching profession, however, has steered mentors away from focusing on the broader global issues of education, as Wright and Bottery (1997) claim.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the perception of Palestinian novice teachers towards effective mentoring. Its findings appear to have significant ramifications for educators in developing regions such as the Arab world. For example, the impoverished output of nearly one-fourth of the participants is significant in its own right. Such an outcome supports the premise that many Palestinian novice teachers find it difficult to identify cognitively with the western concept of mentoring. Hence, educators in the Arab and developing worlds need to take this phenomenon into consideration if they plan to initiate formal mentoring projects in their educational systems. Not only do they need to familiarize their educational personnel with the concept, they must also adapt its implementation to fit within the social and cultural mores existing in the community. The findings also demonstrated that Palestinian novice teachers share concerns and needs similar to those espoused by their peers in the west. A close examination of the findings showed these concerns to be concentrated around professional and educational needs, irrespective of the in-service training they received. In other words, novice teachers seem universally to be apprehensive about the quality of their performance. They seek sources and individuals who can serve them in a supportive advisory capacity. The introduction of formal mentoring programs to assist novice teachers could play a crucial role in this process, provided that it is planned meticulously and adapted to the social-cultural needs of the community in which it is introduced. Unless such precautions are heeded, mentoring programs will be doomed to failure.

NOTE

[1] See E. Stones *JET* Editorial 23(3), 1997 and Editorial 27(1), 2001.

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