

THE ESSENCE of M&M'S: Mentoring Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring minority programs are quickly becoming popular at the college and university levels as a means to retain minority teacher education students. However, the concept of mentoring does not have universal language. The U.S.D.O.E. has voiced the concern about the shrinking pool of minority teachers. Understandably, local school districts are perplexed about the teacher shortage and look to the institutions of higher education for assistance. Recruiting, retaining, mentoring, and supporting minority students are an academic, as well as, a social concern. For example, mentoring is viewed by many as a political issue. Wilson (1987) posits that corporate sector sometimes feel that mentoring is a “charity” act that can solve some of the massive social and economic problems that corporate policies helped to create. Such as the required high test score for student admission to Universities, as well as, Teacher Education Programs. Articulation of an academic environment for an incubator that could foster minority teachers is at the core of this article.

Key Word: Minority is defined as African American or Black

INTRODUCTION

To glean a closer look at the concept of mentoring minority students will require that educators re-evaluate self. Looking at the bigger picture of what it is that we hope to accomplish needs to be a driving force when constructing mentoring programs. Cornel West (1993) stated that life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others (p15). The “window of opportunity” varies from personal lens to personal lens. The filtering of self-values is comprised of life long coping skills. Should one of our goals be to close the gap in minority teacher shortage, then a plan must be developed to address the identified needs of the population to be served. By positive action planning, minority academic conditions and personal worth have a chance to increase. However, the attitudes, values, and cultural lens that perpetuate individual actions and thoughts are reflective understanding of the structural characteristics portrayed in minority culture.

Social analysis reflecting is not always easy. It can sometimes “hit” at the core of one’s motivation for action. For example, I can vividly remember when I first started teaching in the late 70’s. I was assigned to a school in Camden, New Jersey. The school sat across the street from a store that sold beer. The students constantly saw beer bottles, trash and men out of work on their way to school. Here I was, full of energy and ready to change the world of my students. I brought my “bag” of values and attitudes to Mickle Elementary School. As the Christmas Holiday approached, I got the idea to give all my twenty-five third grade students mittens. Instead of my students being excited by their gift from me, they just asked why I gave them mittens. Reflecting, many years later revealed to me that my students really wanted a toy. But, I imposed my values and decided their needs. Had I used their lens, the social rational cultural indicator could have pointed me in the right direction. Striking a psychological balance with minority students takes observation and communication. Trubowitzis (2004) posits: “First read the mentee, students are mentees. Mentors must stress understanding rather than just offering a bag of tricks...allow mentee to share feelings, to express worries, and identify problems...and as the mentor, resist the temptation to be all knowing.”(p.60). Using Trubowitzis, suggestion, my mind wandered to the late 80’s in Houston, Texas. I remember being at Chatman Elementary School. At that time, Beverly Cashaw was the principal. It was her first year as the principal. The first thing she did was to hold a three-day “Breakfast Chat” for the community. She served a full breakfast to each person in the neighborhood. The purpose was to engage the community in dialogue about their desires for the school. She not only raised test scores, but also had the “backing” of the neighborhood. As the guidance counselor, I was involved in that initiative with her. Understandably, there was some personnel causality along the way that had limited vision of student high expectancy.

Allowing free flowing speech is an encourager to developing the element of “trust”. Trust is an essential ingredient to the construction of a mentor program. Mentoring is one key to career and academic success (Freedman. 1992). The goals and aspiration of individuals can be revealed and that can allow for the direction of a

mentoring program. Sue & Sue (2003) insist that the element of true understanding of individuals has the underpinnings of awareness for psychological orientation (p.270).

MENTORING: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ENCOUNTER

Often minorities are referred to as the at-risk population. On the contrary, we contend that there is no such concept as at-risk individuals; but rather, people who are placed in at-risk situations due to circumstances. Subsequently, it is important that the institutions of higher education that support mentoring programs for minority students provide existential psychological realities for the mentoring population. Existentialism focuses on man's freedom of choice and the actions that go with it (Gladding, S., 2000). For example, human behavior can be viewed from two specific lenses.

One such lens is the understanding of the locus of control (Sue & Sue, 2003). The *locus of control* hinges on individuals believing that reinforcements (the external world) are contingent upon their own actions and that they can shape their own fate (p. 271). Understandably, the *locus of control* is not assigned to any one population. It varies from culture to culture and individual to individual. The ideology is to form a general appetite for the concept, so that a mentor can form a knowledge basis for mentoring. Mentoring minority students or any population requires attentive listening skills. The mentor must be able to determine when and how to ask questions to elicit information that might be beneficial to the person seeking help. The other lens is the locus of responsibility. The *locus of responsibility* is the notion that events in life occur independently of one's actions and that the future is determined by chance and luck (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Chart #1 depicts examples of *Locus Theory*.

Locus of Control:	Locus of Responsibility:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will try to do better. • I can do this. • If they can do this, so can I. • I must put in more time at the library. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * It is no use. * I won't win the race. * I do not have the skills. * I do not want to rock the boat of the academic climate of my peers.

As we thought about *Locus Theory*, we came to the rationale that Locus Theory could be a negative or positive self-talk. It can be used to energize an individual to better their circumstances or it can be a self-defeating prophecy. In all probability, we are what we speak. Is it logical that mentors need to be in tune with the verbiage that minority students speak? The underlying thoughts of students should be flushed out through skillful mentoring communication skills. Attitudes and values are a constant outer behavioral display of an individual's belief system.

Often mentors perceive minority students self-talk to reflect laziness or no interest in doing better; but that is not always the case. In addition, some mentors believe that minority students are more unruly, more dangerous, and more likely to be connected to gangs and guns than other students (Larson, C. L. & Ovando, C. L., p.92, 2001). Consequently, the ability to listen and to understand what is said requires on-going training.

Teacher Education Programs are one tool to eliminate distorted pictures of minority students. Meaningful student progress is rooted in the molding of positive self-perception of “identity, meaning, and self-worth as it relates to society” (West, C., p.13, 1993). The ability to become a productive entity in society is a nurturing process that requires mentoring from a neutral lens free of bias.

TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES/COLLEGES INTO AN INCUBATOR FOR MENTORING MINORITY STUDENTS TO TEACH IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

So, where do we go from here? Before us is the task to close the achievement gap and to recruit minority teachers that can teach the perceived disadvantaged. Not forgetting the issue of how to retain the minority and get him or her to graduate from the institution of higher education. We are not delusional in our expectation to offer solution to some of these profound questions, but we are aware that education is in a dilemma for some answers. Is the answer to nurture this population or just admit the minority and let him or her fend for self?

Many institutions of higher education have counseling centers and tutorial centers. But, how many minority students take advantage of those perceived opportunities? Mentoring is a skill that encompasses having sensitivity for different cultures and a high expectancy that they can achieve. For example, Kretovics, J. (1994) articulated: “By 1963 Rosenthal had developed the concept of the expectancy effects from discovery with psychology students and albino rats ...he discovered that if rats became brighter when expected ...then students could become brighter when expected to by their teachers or professors” (p.168).

It is conceivable that educators might argue Rosenthal’s assumption on the basis that students and rats have nothing in common. Also, it is conceivable that someone might question how the cognitive process of rat could be truly measured. The harsh reality is that the world of academics is in a constant mode of seeking solutions to high performance. Such as, Marburger, (1963) made the assertion that teacher expectancy did influence the impact on student intelligence testing (p.306).

There is a strong correlation between mentoring and student performance. The linkage of mentoring extends to retaining students in an academic setting and encouraging them to graduate. First and foremost, attention to minority student needs have to be met. Maslow addressed this issue in his self-actualization model. He

identified six basic needs of man. Mentoring programs have to incorporate many of those unmet needs of students, especially minority students. Such an example is the Support#1, Mentor#1, Graduate #1 (S.M.G.) Mentoring Program at the University of Tennessee.

Low performing undergraduate teacher education majors are paired with high performing graduate teacher education majors. They meet once or twice a month and are encouragers for each other. They discuss personal and academic needs. Once a week, the undergraduate students are provided individual counseling from a trained counselor. The counselor is an assistant professor in the department of Teacher Education Program. Sometimes the counselor helps the students to acquire clothing, low-income housing, or provide a listening ear. Whatever the needs, the mentor and the minority student have a feeling of climbing that academic ladder together.

To be a mentor of minority students is to be an encourager. Mentors of minority students coach and help build the emotional fibers that help minority students to have hope of reaching academic success. Cornel West in his 1993 text, *Race Matters*, stated that the dominate culture like to “high-light the achievement of successful minorities as though the few instances reflect what is available to all Blacks” (p. 13). But, that is so far from the truth. As mentors we should consider that there are many obstacles that prevent minority success. First, is the reality that self-esteem is many times an issue brought on by society inability to prove the support that minorities need.

Minority students have many obstacles to deal with. For example, no spare money, poor housing and poor schooling are some obstacles that urban city minority students face. Some of the obstacles are seen and some are unseen; but nevertheless, it is the job of the Teacher Education Programs at the colleges and universities to prepare Teacher Education Students to teach and to motivate the. Not all teachers will teach in a suburban school district. Some teachers will receive an assignment to teach in an urban or rural area. Subsequently, teacher mentors must be able to recognize problems. Acquiring such skills include the following: 1). Acknowledging that a problem exists. 2). Seeking a workable remedy to the problem(s). 3). Revealing to the student(s); parent(s); and community remedy analysis (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium-ISLLC, 2003).

THE LEGITMANCY OF MENTORING MINORITY STUDENTS

Alternative epistemologies based on mentoring minorities could impact the strategies selected to prepare teachers for the future. Such as, adapting a mentoring model is one vehicle to inducting and increasing the pool of minority teachers. In 1985 Robert Bellah did a study of various mentoring programs. His study revealed that mentoring caused the student to have a sense of worth. The notion that someone thought of the student and their circumstance provided a much-needed linkage to society, and it increased the students' motivation to do better.

Measurement of successful mentoring programs could be determined by the number of students that complete the Teacher Education Program. Also, another measurement for minority success is GPA's of the students in the program. Recruiting minority students and retaining them on the college campus can be done with a concert effort of caring professors. Eventually, there will be no concern about how to graduate the minority student.

As educators, we are well aware that there is no "Blue Print" for the correct mentoring program. However, we do offer some of the dimensions that evolve from such a process. Institutions such as Prairie View A & M, University of Tennessee at Martin, and many other realize that mentoring acknowledges the need to harness the talent of a population underserved. The "quantum leap" to service is not ease. It requires time—maybe your time. It encompasses an action plan with periodic monitoring, adjustments and a continuous feed back loop. In conclusion, the outcome for school districts would be a pool of qualified minority teachers ready to serve in rural, urban, and suburban areas. Valdes, G. (1996) posits that educators should become more aware of the realities, interests and concerns of the minority culture.

Mentoring is one strategy to assist minority students to enter the work force of education and be effective teachers. Lastly, the conditions for mentoring minorities involve appropriate societal choices. Mentors must stay mindful of the "*Locus Perception*" of the individual being served!

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