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WOMEN MENTORS IN ELT: LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES AND COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

"Mentoring is a dynamic reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career development of both". The need for a mentor in the work environment has always been present, but the availability of the mentors has also been limited, and the predominant gender was represented by men, patriarchal figures. Women available as mentors or even as role models were hard to find, and women of colour were quite inexistent. The obstructions were mainly of gender, race, stereotype and ethnicity, jealousy and unfortunately some of the obstacles still exist today when women are underrepresented in leadership positions, in academic or business environment. But "mentoring is beginning to be reconceptualised as a network of developmental relationships that evolve over time"; "relationships are a key source of learning at all stages of careers". The hardships that women mentors and women generally must overcome today are professional seclusion, criticism and downgrading of their projects together with reduced networking and collaborative prospects.

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Keywords: Mentorship, career, psychosocial, gender, stereotype.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction in theory

The concept of mentoring stems in antiquity, in the character of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, from Homer's Odyssey, when she materializes in a wise old, man – the Mentor. *He/she* offers leadership for the immature prince, Odysseus's son, Telemachus who needs guidance to survive, to become insightful, honourable and thoughtful in his unfriendly kingdom as a future ruler for his people. These are the primary attributes a Mentor should endorse and cultivate. "Developmental relationship between two individuals, where usually the individual with more experience, provides guidance for a lesser experienced individual'' (Johnson & Kaslow, 2014, p. 273) or "(...) a person who helps another to think things through." (Turner, 2012, p. 39)

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Limitations women mentors face

Given the ancient androcentric theory we can say we possess an androcentric culture starting from the discovery of electricity, medicinal progress, and mechanized world that we live in today and even the famous phrase: the best cookers are men, " (…) which make the human female carry the burden of ornament." (Gilman, 2015, p. 8) Women available as mentors or even as role models were hard to find, and women of colour were quite inexistent. The obstructions were mainly of gender, race, stereotype and ethnicity, jealousy and unfortunately some of the obstacles still exist today when women are underrepresented in leadership positions, in academic or business environment. The hardships that women mentors and women generally must overcome today are professional seclusion, criticism and downgrading of their projects together with reduced networking and collaborative prospects. Higher education is predominantly of masculine gender occupation, almost 80 percent, including leadership, board and administrative positions. It is of uttermost importance that we see more women teachers and mentors in such leadership positions, and to try, as women, to colour outside the lines that have been drawn for us, to change the environment because "Like fish in the water, we fail to see culture because it is the medium within which we exist" (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005, p. 325)

Mentorship is not excluded from the above enumeration; moreover, this educational field has been a part of this androcentric tradition of didactic management. Women have always been situated at the outskirts of the leadership system, no matter if we speak about education, art or medicine. We might have conquered some milestones yet we are regarded as new, not similar to men, in the same key leading positions. But, from the borders they inhabit, women can, and do operate new, unique ways of perception over things, over mentoring while teaching, and teaching while mentoring. In 1237, Italy, Bettisia Gozzadini receives a law degree from the University of Bologna and later she starts teaching Law at the same University of Bologna. She is believed to be the first woman permitted to teach at a university. Today, mostly in western societies, women of all ages and different upbringing are a significant part of higher education, both as students as well as teachers. They represent an overwhelming majority in faculties, public institutions, hospitals, and almost every type of existing discipline, including elite research universities, military academies, sports faculties and in some countries, female presidents. But things have not always been the same because women mentoring has been and still is, in eastern world, a rare

phenomenon, and women mentors in higher education, today, in the Eastern academe environment are uncommon, also. In the post-communist society, the Millennial generation lacked the generous umbrella of mentorship, a term barely known almost thirty years ago, specified today in The Education Law: Article 248:" In order to occupy the teaching positions provided in art. 247 it is necessary to carry out a practical internship for one school year, carried out in an educational unit, in the didactic function corresponding to the studies, *usually under the guidance of a mentor teacher (...)* (Legea educatiei nationale, 2011, art-248) but scarcely unused as a concept, practicability and outcome. The mere concept of mentoring is still new to many, today, and although there are some kinds of mentoring programs available online, the majority of them remain unresponsive to the needs of the students and teachers, as well. In fact, these so called mentoring programs are still male dominated, thus making it difficult for women to climb in career positions that are seriously masculine gender –dominated, especially in the highest levels of management and decision making. In a society which still offers nowadays few perspectives for mentorship, especially for women mentors in education and higher education; a woman teacher who wants to become a mentor for her classroom/students has to embark on this road alone, searching and striving for ways to become a better teacher, to research, to search for methods and people to connect, to meet the goals of mentorship in a society that offers none.

3. Research Questions

If the concept of mentoring students / future teachers is without practicality how can a teacher- who has not received mentoring- mentor, in turn, his/her students, and, even more, how can a women teacher become a successful mentor in this weary environment she exists?

4. Purpose of the Study

4.1. The scarce/lack of mentorship programs and women mentors and necessary infrastructure/competencies to implement it

The Western society has long time developed the institution of mentorship with great success and represents a major force today, in all institutions, especially in education and business. In America, as compared to Romania, women in leadership positions, from all domains, give accountability to the mentorship programs the institutions offers. There is a chain reaction that ultimately leads to this accomplish and success the Western world thrives, namely that mentor matters and people who have been the beneficiary of this system passed forward the competencies achieved in an ongoing spiral towards the new mentees, who become mentors themselves, and on, to the newest mentees, and on, and on. This machinery is absent in the Easter educational system, and the few non –governmental organizations which offer some mentor programs for teachers – consisting of 40 hours, with transferable credits, and some specialised sites which pretend to want to mentor you–cannot cover the immense need for an institution of mentoring within the institution that you exist and perform your job. Conclusions have been drawn that women teachers mentoring female students has a significantly, positive impact both psychosocial –"(...) career and psychosocial purpose embody two divergent aspects of the mentor's function including also role modelling''(Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011, p. 526) - and in career maturity, moreover, if women mentors climbed management positions, some female protégé would no doubt profit from this situation. Others

might not have anything to gain from this situation, because, in some situations female mentors in management position prefer to distance from their protégés, thus blocking the road for the protégé to achieving such positions.

5. Research Methods

Observing, monitoring and straightforward asking students on what a teacher mentor should be, teachers discover that some of the students do not even know what a mentor is, some do know but cannot provide a definition for the concept or what a mentor is supposed to do, and others would like to be mentored but they simply do not know what steps to follow. Students would often ask if a mentoring office existed and where would that be. Moreover, the idea of having a man mentor rather than a women mentor, especially between the male students, is more appealing. This occurs in the case of female students too, but the percent is not overwhelming such as in the case of male students. Women mentors are seen as superficial, incompetent, weak and unable to secure high ranking positions within the academe, as the men mentors do. When it comes to competences or competencies, students can state some competences of the mentoring teacher but cannot make the difference between the two, excluding a crucial side of the teacher mentor: the human element, because "(…) people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" (Rathus, 2011, p. 246).

If we look up in the dictionary we surprisingly find that competence and competency will return the same translation and employ basically the same meaning. But, if we look at these two words as concepts, they return different focus and definitions. Teacher mentors need to possess, besides *competences* in their field, competencies, which are different from the first, because they speak about ability / capability, based on behaviour or the things a mentor teacher is good at in performing his/her job. Dubois presents two definitions of job competence/competencies:

a) "Job competence is an employee's capacity to meet (or exceed) a job's requirements by producing the job outputs [or results] at an expected level of quality within the constraints of the organization's internal and external environments (Dubois, 1993). Note that this definition is built upon individual achievement of the expected job outputs or results within expected levels of quality, while successfully coping with and surmounting the challenges of both the internal and the external environments of the organization"(Dubois & Rothwell, 2000, p. 14).   In few words, Dubois's definition implies competence being the ability based on job tasks, on what people want to achieve.

b) "A job competency is an underlying characteristic of an employee (that is, a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image, social role, or a body of knowledge) that results in effective and/or superior performance. Boyatzis (1982) notes that a person's knowledge and skills are the traditional "competencies" that individuals bring with them to their jobs or acquire while on the job. When asked for an example of a "competency," most persons will cite knowledge or a skill. This is only part of an individual's compendium of job competencies. Motives or social roles can be considered competencies when use can be shown to directly contribute to the successful achievement of one or more job outputs or results. Have you ever known an individual with a strong desire to achieve some output or result? This person most probably has what is referred to as high "achievement motivation" "(Dubois & Rothwell, 2000, p. 14). In the second

definition Dubois states competency as the ability based on human behaviour, on how people want to achieve.

Competencies come together in three groups: cognitive, referring to thinking, affective, referring to feeling/relating, conative, referring to acting. When it comes to mentoring we can say that "(...) competencies are behaviours that individuals demonstrate when undertaking job-relevant tasks effectively within a given organizational context;" (Whiddett & Hollyforde, 2003, p.7) the organizational context being the mentoring process, within an academic institution. The competencies women mentors in ELT exhibit, focus on the person/student/protégé rather than on the job itself, because it is the behaviour observed in the mentor that leads to effectiveness of the process. A competency mentor moulds his/her style of interacting with the protégés taking into account the feelings of the protégé over the productivity, task or function. Besides methodology: knowledge and skills, assessment, lesson and course planning, and interaction management and monitoring, mentoring brings forth the human element, caring and being sensitive to the desires, dispositions, and above all, feelings of the protégé in your proximity.

6. Findings

6.1. The Queen Bee syndrome and gender discrimination, the need for an innovative mentoring institution within the academic institution

The Queen Bee syndrome "(...) the phenomenon of the sole, high-powered woman in the department who "has it made," but has no desire to help other women to share her high status," (Collins, Chrisler, & Quina, 1998, p. 7). This type of woman is blocking the circle of mentoring and career advancement and she is also called " (...) a false mentor who will try to manipulate the junior person for self-gain. Some women have "queen bee syndrome" and they are not helpful. It is possible to find sympathetic allies among white males." (Mosley & Hargrove, 2014, p. 67) So women mentors, are somehow expected to support their protégés or peers while men mentors are expected to compete with them, at the work environment, resulting in gender discrimination leading to this fabricated Queen Bee syndrome, where women mentors start perceiving protégés as enemies. Mentoring while teaching requires a tremendous effort from the mentor, who needs to know its protégés individually, to be a fine observer on how they react to correction, to praise. Strategies for effective mentoring imply the use of : -clarifying technique, which shows mentor's interest in what the protégé is saying, listening him/her carefully; consulting technique which implies the mentor to respond to the needs of the protégé for explicit information, supporting him/her with choices to take into consideration; -collaborating technique, when the mentor embarks alongside the protégé in solving issues and making decisions, fact that sparks a sense of equivalence and collegiality; -coaching technique, when mentor builds the environment for the new colleague, empowering him/her. Enabling protégés /students is done through a variety of approaches, counting pertinent and fine observations blended with professional dialogue, which authorizes protégés to use in career prospective. Allen and colleagues' (2004) results indicated, first, that individuals who have been mentored receive greater career outcomes than those who have not, including both objective and subjective outcomes (with the exception of intention to stay). Second, results indicated that career-related mentoring was positively related to career outcomes, including compensation, salary growth, promotions, career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with the mentor. Third, the analyses indicated that psychosocial mentoring was also related to career

outcomes (as hypothesized)" (Ragins & Kram, 2007, p. 53). "Female same-sex conflict may indeed occur more frequently than male same-sex conflict in the context of organizations. If so, then a bona fide difference in conflict frequency may be the ultimate source of the belief that women have dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships" (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017, p. 5). Society and the academe environment imposes thus double standards on women mentor, compare to men mentors, limiting the time available for quality mentoring and underexposing women teachers to opportunities, visibility that may boost their careers. "High-quality mentoring is characterized by mutual learning, wherein both partners to a relationship experience increased sense of work, new knowledge, a sense of empowerment, increased zest, and a desire for more connection" (Kram & Higgins, 2009, p.3). The outcome is a negative one, affecting women mentors, marginalizing them and labelling them as less qualified for the job, less influential and esteemed, making female and male students, who aspire to work with such women mentors, hesitant. Cross-gender mentor-protégé relationship becomes now uncomfortable dyadic relation, a challenging situation a teacher mentor has to deal with. "For a variety of reasons, women are more likely than men to be in cross-gender mentoring relationships (Powell, 1999, p. 362). Women mentors-especially if they motherhood, have a significantly increased perception over these kinds of things as compared to male mentors, enabling them to intervene when necessary, to evade unnecessary stress, appealing to students and involving them in language learning.

7. Conclusion

The approach reveals few components that make the process of mentoring possible and efficient, first of all being time, portioned for mentoring and combined with teaching. The innovative approach, is this case, represents the need for women mentors, in ELT, to incorporate learning activities into the daily work of mentoring, attentively considering the course/seminar load and students' needs. In order to do that, teachers must cooperate with academe leaders to implement a helpful infrastructure and supportive learning architecture, solving both time and space problems so needed in this situation: a free office especially equipped and designed for the meetings, or the timetable coinciding with the protégés'. In such conditions, a women mentor may be seen approachable and capable of sharing her experience, counsel or assistance – the essential things a protégé/student needs from her. In the presence of a mentoring programme at the level of the institution, mentor teachers can also find time for regular guidance meetings outside the timetable, on weekly or monthly basis and sometimes when required. Thus, working together, inside the classroom or physically in nearness to one another is another important part of the process, in securing the student/protégé with good communication skills, active support, and eye contact, to offer truthful and caring advice, encouragement and psychosocial development. A mentor with this combination of skills, qualified knowledge and disposition, together with an extremely helpful infrastructure, makes successful mentoring interaction achievable.

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