How Mentor Identity Evolves: Findings From a 10-Year Follow-up Study of a National Professional Development Program

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Abstract

Purpose

Despite academic medicine's endorsement of professional development and mentoring, little is known about what junior faculty learn about mentoring in implicit curricula of professional development programs, and how their mentor identity evolves in this context. The authors explored what faculty–participants in the Educational Scholars Program implicitly learned about mentoring and how the implicit curriculum affected mentor identity transformation.

Method

Semistructured interviews with 19 of 36 former faculty–participants were conducted in 2016. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, data collection and analysis overlapped. The authors created initial codes informed by Ibarra's model for identity transformation, iteratively revised codes based on incoming data patterns, and created visual representations of relationships amongst codes to gain a holistic, shared understanding of the data.

Results

In the implicit curriculum, faculty–participants learned the importance of having multiple mentors, the value of peer mentors, and the incremental process of becoming a mentor. The authors used Ibarra's model to understand how the implicit curriculum worked to transform mentor identity: Faculty–participants reported observing mentors, experimenting with different ways to mentor and to be a mentor, and evaluating themselves as mentors.

Conclusions

The Educational Scholars Program's implicit curriculum facilitated faculty–participants taking on mentor identity via opportunities it afforded to watch mentors, experiment with mentoring, and evaluate self as mentor, key ingredients for identity construction. Leaders of professional development programs can develop faculty as mentors by capitalizing on what faculty–participants learn in the implicit curriculum and deliberately structuring postgraduation mentoring opportunities.

The role of mentoring in helping junior faculty advance in their careers in academic medicine has been well documented.[1–5] Professional development programs that focus on one of academic medicine's central mission areas—education—often have a mentoring component,[6,7] and the positive impact of such programs on participants as mentees has been previously reported.[8–14]

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The authors have informed the journal that they agree that Donna D'Alessandro and Maryellen E. Gusic have completed the intellectual and other work typical of the senior author.

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Aside from professional development programs, mentoring programs with explicit or formal curricula for developing mentors and building mentor relationships in academic medicine have been described.[11,15–20] For example, a structured mentoring curriculum has been shown to improve clinical and translational research mentoring skills, at least in the short term.[21] However, from a constructivist perspective, learning is more than delivery of information in the explicit curriculum; learning happens when individuals construct knowledge through their experience. According to Eisner,[21] the implicit curriculum of an educational program is manifested not only in unplanned teaching events but also in constructs such as organizational structure and social values. Simply stated, the implicit curriculum is what educational programs teach but do not advertise; it is the "other-than-explicit" curriculum. Thus, any professional development program with a mentoring component, such as a mentored scholarly project or peer mentoring, affords opportunities for learning about mentoring by virtue of the program's implicit or informal curriculum.[21,22] Participants learn about the value of, and expectations for, mentors in the implicit curriculum; in addition, they can see mentors in action and practice as mentors in the implicit curriculum.

Long-term outcomes of professional development programs that focus on education target academic productivity and research success[10,23–26]; long-term outcomes related to mentoring within these programs are unknown. More recently, the impact of professional development programs on professional identity has illuminated the importance of socialization and the implicit curriculum.[27–30] As it relates to mentoring, the implicit curricula of professional development programs might influence the incremental process of taking on a mentor identity.[30–32] To that end, we sought to explore mentor identity in a follow-up study of participants in a professional development program that incorporates peer mentoring and

mentoring from both institutional and national senior faculty mentors.

Ibarra's[33] model of identity transformation provides a lens through which to examine how participants in a professional development program take on a mentor identity, one facet of academic identity. Briefly, Ibarra suggests that individuals engage in three critical tasks, tasks which are typically situated in the implicit curriculum: observing role models, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating these experiments. By observing a range of role models, individuals can select from a repertoire of styles that can serve as provisional selves. Individuals can test these styles to evaluate goodness of fit, and make judgments about the fit through self-reflection or feedback from others. Ibarra acknowledges that identity transformation does not occur in a vacuum. Beyond the explicit and implicit curricula of any educational program, contextual factors such as job opportunities can facilitate or constrain identity transformation, as do individual factors such as one's ability and past experience.

Our belief as researchers and authors is that Ibarra's theoretical concepts could be a useful starting point to explore mentor identity transformation. It has been helpful for elucidating how trainees and junior faculty come to identify as clinician scientists.[34] Knowing what, and how, mentees learn about mentoring in the implicit curriculum could inform the design and implementation of professional development programs to better support mentor identity transformation and to engage participants in shaping their own identity as mentors.[30,31,35]

Introduction

The Academic Pediatric Association's Educational Scholars Program (ESP) is a national professional development program that aims to promote educational scholarship in the field of pediatrics.[36,37] Scholars are expected to complete an explicit curriculum, including didactic sessions, self-directed learning activities, and a longitudinal mentored scholarly project.[37] Colleagues affiliated with the program recently reported the impact of ESP in terms of outcomes related to educational scholarship,[9] and we previously reported on the evolution of mentoring relationships in this same program.[12] Specifically, we found that mentees (i.e., scholars who are typically junior faculty in pediatrics) started with a single traditional mentor but, over the course of the program, sought out multiple mentors, and included their peers in their network of mentors.

Curious about long-term program outcomes related to mentoring, and about mentor identity, we reengaged with participants in our previous study 10 years after they entered ESP as mentees in the program. Our present inquiry was guided by the research question "What do ESP participants learn about mentoring in the program's implicit curriculum, and how does the implicit curriculum facilitate the process of taking on a mentor identity?"

Method

Methodology

Consistent with our constructivist perspective to understanding how both explicit and implicit curricula affect learning, we took a constructivist approach to grounded theory; that is, we retained a focus on an iterative process of analyzing and conceptualizing data, as per grounded theory, but acknowledged our role in constructing knowledge, and how the professional identity literature shaped our thinking.[38,39] One of our research group (D.B.) was known to participants from the previous study and conducted most of the interviews in this study. Another member of our team (A.D.) serves as an ESP faculty advisor currently but, at the time of the study, did not hold a leadership position in the program. Of our group, D.D., L.C., and M.G. hold leadership roles in the ESP; D.D. and M.G. were coinvestigators in the previous study.[12]

Sample

In April 2016, we invited all ESP scholars from the first two cohorts who were part of our evolving focus group study in 2007–2009 (n = 36) to participate in follow-up interviews. Within this group of original participants, we purposefully identified key informants based on their sustained involvement and/or leadership within the ESP. We postponed interviews with key informants until others had been interviewed so that they could comment on emerging findings after they answered the main interview questions. We obtained approval from the institutional review board at Stony Brook University (New York) and consent from all participants to audiotape the interviews.

Data collection

We created an interview guide (Supplemental Digital Appendix 1, available at http://links.lww.com/ACADMED/A532) that asked about the following: the status of the mentoring relationships the scholars established in the ESP—both project mentors (i.e., mentors within the scholar's institution who supported their scholarly project) and peers; their understanding of self as mentor and what influenced that understanding; and advice for current ESP scholars about moving into a mentor role. From May to December 2016, two of us (D.B., A.D.) used this guide to conduct semistructured, one-on-one interviews with a total of 19 participants.

Interviews lasted 28 minutes on average (range 15–50 minutes). Eight interviews were conducted in person and the rest over the telephone. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data in the form of interview transcripts were managed in DeDoose software (SocioCultural Research Consultants, Manhattan Beach, California). For reasons of confidentiality, only D.B. and A.D. had access to interview transcripts in their entirety.

Analysis

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory,[38] data collection overlapped with data analysis, and analysis was sensitized by our previous findings and Ibarra's[33] model. One member of our team (D.B.) led the coding and created an initial list of codes in consultation with another (A.D.) (e.g., multiple mentors, peer mentors). Over a period of six months (July–December 2016), these researchers applied codes to discrete segments of data. As they worked through the data, they iteratively revised the codes and code list based on concepts that were prominent in incoming data (e.g., "feeling confident," "giving back," "being invited"). We met four times to review coded data from the first 13 interviews and to critique tentative propositions

about relationships between codes and categories of codes. In our preliminary analysis, we were comfortable with the goodness of fit of Ibarra's model but uncovered what seemed to be an inflection point: moving from mentoring trainees versus mentoring faculty. Thus, we added a question to the interview guide to explore this distinction in interviews with key informants. They further informed our analysis by commenting on findings from our preliminary analysis and talking about how preliminary analysis resonated with their experience.

Given the stability of the data after six key informants were interviewed, one of our team (D.B.) applied the final code list to all 19 interview transcripts. Thereafter, the team met monthly to further critique categories of codes and to update visual representations of relationships amongst categories of codes in an effort to gain a holistic and shared understanding of the data.

Trustworthiness

We employed multiple checks on trustworthiness. One researcher (D.B.) led the coding for the sake of consistency; A.D. assisted with code creation and reviewed and checked all codes applied by D.B. We had regular calls as a research team to partner in the "meaning making" of coded data. We also considered key informants' perspectives when developing interpretations of our findings.[40]

Results

We organized our findings around our research question and provide illustrative quotes.

What do participants learn about mentoring in the implicit curriculum?

As scholars in the ESP program between 2007 and 2009, participants were formally in the role of mentee. Ten years later, all considered themselves as mentors in some capacity, although readiness to self-identify as a mentor was variable. In the ESP's explicit curriculum, participants gained education-specific knowledge and skills that they needed to effectively mentor others. One commented on having "the knowledge and skill set":

> I have junior people that I'm trying to get to do more projects than they were. I feel like I have the knowledge and skill set to move their project along, more than I was able to before.

Mentor training was not part of the ESP's explicit curriculum; when asked if it should be part of the explicit curriculum, only a few participants agreed. Most said that learning to be a mentor was an experiential activity. One suggested, "Rather than a curriculum, there needs to be mentorship for mentoring." In line with this sentiment, participants learned much about mentoring through the ESP's implicit curriculum and described three lessons: the importance of multiple mentors, the value of peer mentors, and the incremental process of becoming a mentor. When asked about adding mentor training to the ESP, nearly all participants affirmed learning in the implicit curriculum. As one said, it would be "superficial and meaningless to just discuss mentoring [in the explicit curriculum]."

Participants learned about the importance of multiple mentors in the implicit curriculum. Some mentors had official roles in the ESP; others did not. Some mentors provided mentorship specifically for scholarly projects; others provided more general career mentoring. One participant talked about a "network" of mentors:

> I benefited from having a network of mentors, so I didn't have a single mentor relationship.… I got guidance from a lot of different folks.

Second, participants learned about the value of peer mentoring in the implicit curriculum. Many recalled their ESP experience as "mentoring each other along," for instance:

> The learning community of what was mentees over time become a learning community of mentors. We all moved together from mentee to mentor … hearing from and learning from others going through the process.

Lessons related to the importance of multiple mentors and the value of peer mentors were salient in the implicit curriculum across time. The third lesson, learning about the incremental process of becoming a mentor, typically occurred when participants were invited to mentor upcoming scholars. Of the 19 we interviewed, 15 participants stayed involved in the ESP in a mentor capacity. One spoke of "passing the baton":

> I think that there's a baton passing in this program that can happen, and I saw it in my group and myself. It's sort of that walking the walk, and walking the walk together. It's an amazing journey…. I've wanted to contribute to the program and be a faculty mentor. It's very important.

Participants learned that being a mentor was not a simple step from mentee to mentor; it was an incremental process. They moved from mentoring only or mostly trainees and peers in the program to mentoring faculty who were upcoming scholars in the program. As participants gained experience as mentors in the program, they also gained confidence in their progression as mentors and their ability to meet institutional expectations of more senior faculty to serve as mentors for other faculty.

Compared with mentoring trainees who were subordinate to faculty, and with mentoring peers who were on equal footing, mentoring faculty outside of the ESP was more challenging. It often occurred in the absence of clear lines of authority or clear expectations. One participant reflected:

> They have different academic expectations and different preferences. You need some "street cred" to mentor faculty here as opposed to residents and fellows.

How does the implicit curriculum teach lessons about mentoring and facilitate mentor identity transformation?

Although all participants considered themselves as mentors in some capacity, they had difficulty describing their process of becoming a mentor. One wondered:

> I don't know when that shift happened…. I wonder though if [being a mentor] is less prevalent when you are trying to figure out what you're doing for yourself. You have to be able not only to focus on yourself but on others too. It's that transition or ability to do both at the same time which is hard as a junior faculty. You don't have the confidence or ability to think that far outside.

Ibarra's[33] model, with its three critical tasks of identity transformation (observing role models, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating these experiments), and its acknowledgment of contextual and individual factors that influence this transformation, sheds light on what participants did not, or could not, voice

in the interviews. It elucidated how the implicit curriculum taught lessons about mentoring (the importance of multiple mentors, the value of peer mentors, and the incremental process of becoming a mentor) and thus facilitated identity transformation from mentee to mentor.

Participants watched and listened to an array of mentors in the implicit curriculum, mentors with different mentoring roles and different mentoring styles. Building on her own experience, one participant suggested that upcoming scholars should observe models:

> They should look at who they have seen as mentors and pick out qualities that best coalesce with how they feel about themselves. I'm trying to say when something is organic to you, it works a lot better.

Watching and listening to mentors gave participants a repertoire of resources. They saw different ways to be a mentor: in a traditional dyad, being one of multiple mentors, or as a peer mentor. One shared her change in thinking:

> I used to think that a mentor–mentee relationship had to be with one specific person, someone on-site and local. Being part of ESP has expanded my view of that relationship.

Beyond thinking differently, participants learned to avail themselves to different types of mentors. One participant noted:

> I have learned to seek out mentors for virtually everything I do. Some are content mentors … others are methodological mentors, and some are life mentors.

With this repertoire of resources in hand, participants experimented with mentoring styles in the implicit curriculum. One described experimentation as "mimicry":

> There are things that resonate and engage you. There's work that goes into it and mimicry as well or "I don't want to do it like that," and it becomes a rejection or generational copying.

Sometimes participants experimented as a peer mentor in the program. One talked about shared learning:

> They're transmitting to you and you to them how to receive guidance, how to look for guidance, how to ask questions, and what's the best way to go.

Another shared her experience with finding a mentoring style for faculty at her institution that was "organic":

> It is a dance. I don't want to be so busy that when I see him I say, "Yeah, we never got around to meeting." On the other hand, I could say, "How are things going? Is your IRB submitted? Have you started the study?" I did a little of that initially, but I didn't want to be breathing down his neck. I just wanted to be a support.

Finally, participants evaluated their different mentoring "selves" in the implicit curriculum. Were they comfortable as a primary mentor, or one of several in a "coalition of people who are acting as mentors"? Were they ready to mentor other faculty at their institution? Did their mentoring "self" reflect their personal values? Or, as one participant asked, "Am I mentoring for the right reasons; I really want to help, but are there conflicts of interest?"

Some participants relied on external evaluation to help answer these types of questions. For example, one told this story about readiness:

> At the same time I moved to my position in education, a new person moved to be section chief. He said, "You'll be a mentor for this faculty member. Now you are the grown-up." And then I realized he was right.

Others relied on internal evaluation or reflection. One participant noted:

> I am older now, and when somebody who is really young comes in, I have to think to myself, "I'm far more experienced, but am I actually giving good advice?" It's like recalibrating or trying to be insightful and recognizing that even though I'm confident, there needs to be insight into how to give advice.

Consistent with Ibarra's[33] model, contextual and individual factors outside the ESP's implicit curriculum also influenced mentor identity. For instance, participants described contextual affordances at their home institution. Some took on formal responsibilities for mentoring faculty: "I've been identified in our institution as being someone who could help mentor faculty who are interested in education." Others described individual values that helped them take on a mentor identity, such as taking initiative: "jumping into a project as one of several mentors and seeking out what you need to know." Another talked about the importance of giving back:

> I think the idea that you can give back and that you can help others develop is very valuable, particularly as you move ahead in your career and your own professional development.

Discussion

Our qualitative study is among the first, to our knowledge, to shed light on what participants in professional development programs that focus on education learn about mentoring in the implicit curriculum. Simply stated, the ESP taught more about mentoring than it advertised in its explicit curriculum.[37] In the implicit curriculum, participants learned about the importance of multiple mentors, the value of peer mentors, and the incremental process of becoming a mentor. What they learned about mentoring in the implicit curriculum was pervasive and powerful because it was grounded in observation, experimentation, and evaluation of self. In essence, the implicit curriculum provided the key ingredients for socialization that are often described in the professional identity formation literature.[29,31,41] By capitalizing on what is learned about mentoring in the implicit curriculum, professional development programs that focus on education can prepare participants to serve as mentors at their institutions, thus moving the boundaries beyond traditional faculty development and into workplace communities.[42]

Analysis of our findings, informed by theoretical concepts from the work of Ibarra,[33] helps to elucidate the process by which mentees in professional development programs with an education focus take on a mentor identity. Ibarra's three critical tasks—observation, experimentation, and evaluation of self—align with concepts from the community of practice paradigm and other learning theories—namely, role models, experiential learning, and reflection.[29,43] They also align with descriptions of how professional development programs contribute to the formation of an academic identity.[27] Future research might consider the application

of other theories and models to further elucidate the process of identity transformation, particularly as it occurs within professional development programs.

Implications for practice

ESP program leaders did not set out to teach the participants how to be mentors, or to transform mentor identity. However, our findings show that the ESP's implicit curriculum cultivated mentor identity and did so in ways that aligned well with Ibarra's[33] model. Our findings are based on a relatively small sample of faculty in one discipline; however, other professional development programs might learn, from the ESP experience, how to promote mentor identity in their faculty–participants and how to support the integration of this identity into the roles of faculty members. We draw on our data to suggest the following:

- First, program leaders and faculty should recognize their positions as role models for mentoring, and encourage participants to experiment with different approaches to mentoring that they observe.
- Second, peer mentors not only can support each other but also can provide a safe context for participants to see other mentors and to experiment with mentoring their peers.
- Third, program leaders should engage participants in reflective dialogue about what they learn about mentoring in the implicit curriculum. This information could be used by the program to guide continuous program improvement, and by participants to transform their professional identity.
- Last, professional development programs should be deliberate in structuring postprogram opportunities for participants. Specifically, opportunities to engage as mentors in the program are a means to transform mentor identity, to build mentor capacity that can sustain the program, and to prepare participants for mentoring roles in their institution.

Limitations

The data we collected were based on what participants reported about themselves as mentors; their mentees may have a different perspective. We did not include an assessment of the quantity or quality of mentoring that participants provided—from either their own mentees, supervisors, or peers. Our sample was from only one professional development program with a focus on medical education. Transferability to other types of professional development programs is unknown but is ripe for future research.

Conclusion

The ESP's implicit curriculum facilitated participants taking on a mentor identity via opportunities the program afforded to watch mentors, to experiment with mentoring, and to evaluate self-as-mentor. Professional development programs should be aware of the learning that occurs in the implicit curriculum and be deliberate in structuring the program, as well as postgraduation opportunities for mentoring, as a means to transform mentor identity, to build mentor capacity that can sustain the program, and to help faculty meet expectations for mentoring roles at their institution.

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