

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

SUSTAINED MENTORING OF STUDENTS OF COLOR: A TESTIMONIO IN TWO VOICES

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My educational trajectory is highlighted by the many educators that played an influential role in my education, and I remember those pivotal moments when they impacted me the most. My fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Martin, gave his students attention and infected us with a passion for learning. He took us on a field trip to a university and told us that we would all be going to college and for many of his students, including myself, it was the first time we stepped foot on a university campus and had a teacher telling us that. Mr. Martin taught us to believe in ourselves and developed in me a love for learning. I remember one time I forgot my math book at school, and he drove to my house to drop it off because my mom did not drive. As a student, I saw the attention and commitment he had for his students and felt that he authentically cared for our education and wellbeing. —Nadia

I have been lucky to have mentors throughout my educational career, from my creative writing teacher, to my close friends from Oak Street School, where I taught for more than 13 years, to my colleagues who I learn from every day. But the mentors I have learned the most from are my students. I learned from bilingual elementary students how to challenge and excite them and support their language acquisition in multiple ways and the importance of my actions and inactions both

contextually and politically. I learn from teachers and educational leaders how to navigate teaching and learning in mutually beneficial ways. —Sharon

There is a growing body of research that examines the advantages of mentoring first generation graduate students of color as they navigate advanced degrees (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Smith, 2007). Much of the literature focuses on relationships between mentee and mentor and how programs can include pedagogical practices that facilitate leadership growth (Flores Carmona & Luschen, 2014; Prieto & Villenas, 2012).

The research on mentoring further offers definitions and blueprints for developing programs that support students of color as they navigate higher education (Brown et al., 1999). Mentoring can be defined as “a form of professional socialization whereby a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as guide, role model, teacher, and patron of a less experienced (often younger) protégé” (Moore & Amey, 1988, p. 45). Mentoring is inherently linked to leadership as mentors guide and support students as they navigate academia (Moore & Amey). This focus on guidance and support (Chandler, 1996) seems incomplete—ignoring the duality of the relationship between mentors and mentees, especially relationships that develop organically and informally (Desimone et al., 2014). We believe that mentoring is mutually beneficial (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Cole, 2015) since we are instrumental in developing, maintaining, and supporting the relationship; we both gain from our engagement as mentor and mentee and at times those names apply to each/both of us as roles evolve.

Our Mentoring Journey: A Testimonio in Two Voices

Using a dual voiced *testimonio*, a first person narrative focused on lived experiences (Beverley, 1989), we discuss the mentoring practices in one Ed.D. Program in Educational Leadership at a large urban public university in California through the eyes of one mentee, Nadia, and her mentor, Sharon. The use of *testimonio* as a methodological tool focuses on creating a collective understanding of experiences that are often left untold, and explores participants' "critical reflection of their personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities" (Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). As methodology, *testimonios* give "voice to silences, representing the other, reclaiming authority to narrate, and disentangling questions surrounding legitimate truth" (Bernal et al., 2012, p. 365). Our goal for this *testimonio* was to create a collective understanding of our experiences as mentor and mentee. As we navigated our *testimonio* we responded to specific questions first individually and then jointly, co-constructing the narrative as a collaborative effort.

Our collective understanding includes self-reflection on our relative roles in the Ed.D. program, how we learned from each other, and the practices that supported Nadia's success through the lens of *shared authority* (Frisch, 2003; Wong, 2016), a term used to describe the interviewee-interviewer relationship in oral histories. The notion of shared authority in oral history research considers the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant, whose story the researcher will narrate through their work. Since we co-constructed this *testimonio* together we were not dependent on informants to generate the story nor were we placed in a position of authority as interviewers (Enguix, 2014). Rather, we negotiated our shared narrative through a self-reflexive stance with attention to each other's stories and

where we “fit” into the larger narrative. Therefore, we use the term shared authority as it embodies “the cultivation of trust, the development of collaborative relationships, and shared decision-making” (High, 2009, p. 13) that became part of our shared story as Nadia navigated her doctoral studies through graduation and beyond. The following testimonio describes how we both approached this relationship and how it evolved over the course of Nadia’s program.

Nadia on entering the program. I decided I was going to pursue a doctorate degree as I was completing my last year in my graduate program in special education. I did not have a faculty “mentor” at the time other than my assigned academic advisors, whose advice I followed to a T. I have always been passionate about education and my personal experience working with students with special needs spearheaded my desire to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership. I did my research on the various educational doctorate (Ed.D.) programs that were available near and far. Ultimately, I wanted a program/campus that felt safe like the university I attended, where I successfully completed both my undergraduate and graduate degrees. A full-time student, I was also the head of my household and working full time as a special education teacher. I could not afford to complete a doctoral program that would require that I take a leave of absence from work. I was looking for an Ed.D. program that was going to value my diversity and experience in all the roles I play as an educational practitioner, woman of color, and researcher. I am a trailblazer in my family as the first to earn a graduate degree and to pursue a doctoral degree. I was looking for a program that was going to develop the skills needed to become a leader in education and contribute to groundbreaking changes in terms of research, leadership, and pedagogy.

Sharon on beginning to mentor. Although I benefited from mentorship during my career, I never gave the concept much thought until I co-authored our Ed.D. program in 2008 along with two colleagues. We worked hard to formalize mentoring practices in our program, including laboratories of practice (labs) adapted from the Carnegie Project for the Educational Doctorate (Perry & Imig, 2008). Our version of labs included faculty-student mentoring in addition to cross-age/cross-cohort groups, where students further along in the program support newer students. The students are initially placed in labs based on research interests and stay in the same lab through their first two years of study. Once students enter the dissertation phase they usually switch to their dissertation chair's lab.

Dissertation Writing Support

The dissertation phase of the Ed.D. kicks the need for support into high gear. Suh (2008) compares the support a mentor provides during dissertation writing to running a marathon, stating "to finish it successfully, you have to create a support system that allows you to breathe" (p. 91). The dissertation process requires determination, balance, and support.

Nadia on writing her dissertation. As I began drafting my proposal and dissertation, I came across many challenges that I did not anticipate. Academic writing can be challenging and when I started writing my dissertation, I was glad to have the unconditional support from my dissertation chair and mentor, Sharon. I have been successful academically and professionally due to my perseverance and dedication, along with the support I have received from educators that inspire me to strive for excellence. Sharon has been one of those

educators that have provided academic support, rigor, and mentorship since the day I met her at my interview for the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program in 2013. She was a familiar face, as I remember coming across her several times on campus. I did not know her then, but little did I know that she would become my professor, advisor, mentor, colleague and, above all, a role model.

While completing my doctoral coursework, I took several classes with Sharon and she helped me unpack and develop my dissertation topic in her research methods classes, lab, and eventually as my dissertation chair. We developed a relationship where we had opportunities to discuss our experiences as women in academia, our cultural background, and being the first in our families to complete a doctoral degree. She was always available to me. This was evident when I was completing my dissertation, working on final revisions. Sharon worked with me extensively in office hours and she was on the phone with me late at night encouraging me to carry on, providing much needed moral support. During my doctorate program, I was a full-time doctoral student, head of household, and a special education teacher, so I put my time management skills to use. Sharon offered me her office as a space I could access for quiet writing time. I would leave my classroom during the week and work in her office where I collected and analyzed data and made many revisions, completing most of my dissertation writing there. I am sharing only my own testimonio, but I am confident that many of the doctoral graduates in the Ed.D. program can share a similar story. Sharon's commitment and dedication to her students, including me, is demonstrated in her passion for teaching and advising amongst all the things she does for the doctorate program.

The Ed.D. program on my campus is made up of culturally diverse students, many of whom, like me, are first-generation doctoral students and having faculty like Sharon is vital.

Support systems are essential when you are completing an advanced degree and especially a doctoral degree. While working on my doctorate I relied on the mentorship of my professors and cohort members, who became more like family. While in the Ed.D. program I kept a positive outlook on the dissertation process and learned to be more compassionate with myself and others.

Sharon on supporting Nadia's dissertation writing. When Nadia asked me to be her dissertation chair, I was excited but anxious because I was not familiar with her topic, which ended up evolving over time. I had already supervised 10 dissertations and my support philosophy was to adapt to the needs of each student. Being a first-generation college student myself and the only one in my family with a doctorate, I used my own experiences as a starting point. I am a former bilingual elementary teacher and my first experience as a researcher was during my first doctoral class. I had no idea what to do and ended up seeking support from another teacher in my class.

I view my doctoral students as colleagues and while I may have some knowledge to impart, I know that they are experts in their fields and have so much to teach me. I tell my students that the single most important factor in finishing the dissertation is hard work. As she progressed, I saw Nadia's hard work paying off, but I was also pushed to learn new things in order to keep up with her. There were times when I had to pull back and let her work through things, other times when I needed to be direct, and sometimes when I had to take

the role of advocate and “mama bear” to confront obstacles in her way, including confronting committee members who tried to impose additional requirements for her dissertation.

Mentors, Mentoring and Leadership

One role for an Ed.D. program is to grow/nurture leaders; this growth comes from understanding that leading and learning are inextricably linked (Beattie, 2002). The mentor’s role includes frank and open discussions of how to navigate academic systems that may be unfamiliar to the doctoral students, but also to support their induction into such systems that may be part of their future career paths (Yob & Crawford, 2012)

Nadia on becoming/being a leader. I am a first-generation Latina doctoral graduate and Sharon’s mentorship helped me break through many barriers. Academia can be overwhelming when no one in your family or circle of friends has earned an advanced degree. Sharon’s mentorship has been essential in my development as an adjunct professor, academic, and educational leader (P-20). It is inspiring to learn from the vast experience Sharon offers as a practitioner and the many hats she wears in academia.

Sharon made my first experience working in higher education possible by offering me a part-time assistantship in the Ed.D. program. The experience with the assistantship allowed me to gain the confidence to be in front of a doctoral level classroom and mentor fellow Ed.D. students that were in various stages of their dissertation research. I was also given the opportunity to share my research in the Ed.D. research symposium which also allowed for networking and relationship building.

Networking in any field is important and Sharon encourages her students to do so in particular at research conferences. I first learned about the American Educational Research Association (AERA) through her as she encourages all her students to attend and eventually submit their research. The first year I attended the conference as a student, I was amazed to see the renowned researchers presenting. I remember being nervous about approaching the various researchers after a presentation.

I am proud to say that with Sharon's guidance and mentorship I submitted and presented my research at AERA and other educational conferences. I co-taught the Practitioner Research course with Sharon for the last three years and I have the pleasure of collaborating and learning from her vast experience in education. Working with Sharon has opened many doors because she has given me opportunities to develop as an academic and professional. Her passion for education inspires me and pushes me to further pursue education as the innovator and leader that she is.

Sharon on leadership. Our doctoral students come to the program as experts in their respective positions. Some are in leadership positions like principals or postsecondary administrators, but others are teachers or staff leaders. I think it is important to unpack the notion of leadership and look at ways that leadership happens in and out of educational institutions. In my role as Ed.D. program co-director I want my students to take up and challenge leadership, challenge the system. I meet the students during their interviews and then see them in different spaces throughout their programs. I notice that sometime around the third semester in the program students begin to advocate for themselves and even question the requirements put in place for them.

As Nadia and I worked together in my lab, classes, and on her dissertation, I watched as she took a leadership stance in leading group work, class activities, and program activities. She became my teaching assistant, where she supported me as I taught practitioner research, and when she graduated she became my colleague—my co-teacher—but she was already my friend.

Our mutual mentor/mentee relationship has helped us both navigate the living, breathing thing that is academia—we have come full circle in that relationship. I had major back surgery two days after Nadia submitted her final dissertation. School started five weeks after my surgery and only three weeks after my release from the hospital, still on oxygen and pain meds. Now the mentee became the mentor. Nadia co-taught my class and was there to support me every week. I did not miss one day of work and could not have done that myself.

What We Learned about Mentoring Graduate Students in Ed.D. Programs

Throughout our work together we both learned much about the fluid nature of mentoring relationships like ours that cut across age, experiences, and backgrounds. Stanley and Lincoln (2005) focus on cross-race mentoring and list lessons learned from their own relationship, including the work that needs to be taken up by both individuals and sensitivity to the needs of the mentee. We echo those lessons and offer some of our own.

1. While assigned formal mentoring partnerships can be beneficial, ones that form organically may be more successful in terms of developing mutual relationships. While pairs may be assigned based on mentor knowledge and mentee needs, informal mentoring often includes a focus on soft skills that are also needed for

success (Desimone et al., 2014). There should be opportunities to provide support for informal mentoring relationships that arise organically.

2. Mentoring relationships must be based on trust (Cole, 2015) built over time and through interactions—this is a challenging aspect of the relationship. This can be especially challenging when mentor and mentee come from different backgrounds, and it is incumbent on both parties to consider perspectives that are different from their own. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) suggest that when we are confronted with ideas that conflict with our own world view we often return to the safety of what we perceive to be the way the world works. Both parties must feel free to challenge each other (Beyene et al., 2002), but it is incumbent on the mentor to create the space where this can take place initially, given the inherent power dynamic in the mentor/mentee relationship.
3. When mentoring graduate students of color, mentors must make efforts to help mentees access and use the social capital inherent in navigating academia (Smith, 2007). Good mentoring includes “..helping students to develop their confidence, teaching, networks, and long-term career ambitions” (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017. p. 7). This includes teaching things like how to present at a research conference, how to write a cover letter for an academic position, how to develop a vita instead of a resume, in addition to helping them teach and conduct research.
4. Reciprocal mentoring partners must be willing to learn from each other and challenge the power dynamic that exists between faculty and student. Rather than

viewing mentoring as supervisory (Manathunga, 2007), we share *authority* (Frisch, 2003) as we work together.

Concluding Thoughts

Stanley and Lincoln (2005) promote the idea of creating agents of change through cross-race mentoring to create a more inclusive academic community. Shared authority and weaving reflections and experiences of one's practice in testimonio form is a conscious effort that Prieto and Villenas (2012) describe as "...building bridges to our collective power as the basis for compassionate pedagogy" (p. 427). Our mutual mentorship expanded pedagogy to practice in terms of our ongoing reciprocal support in ways that went beyond the scope of formal mentoring programs; this continued cycle of support was voluntary, flexible, and subject to change. This led us to believe in the strength of mentoring relationships that are achieved through individual choice and negotiation (Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008).

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