

# NURSING RESEARCHER AS A MENTOR IN TERTIARY HEALTH INSTITUTIONS: THE GAMBIAN EXPERIENCE

Jainaba Sey-Sawo, Haddy Tunkara-Bah, Omar Manjang, Opeyemi Ojo  
PhD Students. Department of Nursing Science, College of Basic Medical  
Sciences, University of Benin, Nigeria/University of the Gambia,

## **Abstract**

*Mentoring is not a new concept and there is no doubt that it is essential for fostering the success of student nurses' education career. The aim of this paper is to discuss nursing researcher as a mentor in tertiary health institutions in the Gambia based on a review of the literature. Very few tertiary health institutes exist in The Gambia. The advent of higher nursing education (under and post graduate) is very recent. In order, to keep pace with increasing demand of nursing services coupled with rising academic and professional standards, nursing researchers have begun to evolve in these institutions. Nursing lecturers in these training institutions are expected to be nursing researchers. However, none of these nurse researchers has a research grant to conduct nursing research. Nursing researchers are not trained on mentoring skills and mentorship is mainly informal in tertiary health institutions. It is therefore paramount to train nursing researchers in mentoring skills to promote excellence in education, research and health care delivery in the country.*

**Keywords:** Nursing Researcher, Mentor, Tertiary Health Institution, the Gambian

## **Introduction**

Mentoring has received considerable attention in the popular and research literature since the 1970s. Nursing is a profession based on a scientific body of knowledge. It is understood that knowledge acquired from research when translated into practice contributes to nursing through improvement in patient health outcomes and refinement in clinical skills, leading to improved standards of care.

According to Morrison-Beedy, Aronowitz, Dyne and Mkandawire (2001) it is critical that students are exposed to education that promotes nursing as a science, which is best accomplished through mentoring in research projects. First, mentoring is an intentional and a nurturing process that fosters the development of the mentee towards his full potential and an insightful process in which the

wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the beneficiary. Mentoring is a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between two individuals that must be voluntary in order to function successfully (Morrison-Beedy, Aronowitz, Dyne, & Mkandawire, 2001). Mentoring is a dynamic process and a developmental network of mentoring can help mentees identify several mentors who can address a variety of career-related needs. Successful mentorships often evolve into friendships with both partners learning and providing support for the other. Mentors are individuals in possession of knowledge/ expertise who willingly help another of less experience to learn about the field in which they wish to pursue (Fawcett, 2002). Mentors must bring to life the sleeping potential within their students that without assistance would otherwise be wasted and devising methods to sharpen the protégé's intellectual skills. A mentee refers to the broad range of individuals who may be in the role of "learner" in mentoring relationships, regardless of the age or position of the mentor and mentee (The American Psychological Association, 2006). In order to produce competent nurse researchers, it is important to begin mentoring nurses early. Experienced faculties are in the position to create a basis for research with their students, to emphasize the relationship between research and nursing, and to inspire students to pursue higher education (Morrison-Beedy, Aronowitz, Dyne, & Mkandawire, 2001). In higher education, Lyons, Scroggins, and Rule (1990) found that mentors not only transmitted formal academic knowledge and provided socialization experiences into their chosen discipline, but also bolstered the students' confidence and professional identity, giving them a vision of the identity they might one day achieve.

A recent study found that nurses did not understand or value research and had no knowledge of where to find information to base their practices. Therefore, if nurses were mentored and informed of where to find the information to base their practices, they would be prepared to translate evidence based information into their practice (Pravikoff, Tanner, & Pierce, 2005).

In the Gambia, very few tertiary health institutes exist. The advent of higher nursing education (under and post graduate) is very recent in the country. Nursing research has been incorporated into the curricula of the Gambia College, School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of The Gambia and American International University, where all nursing lecturers in these training institutions are expected to be nursing researchers and research supervisors to students. Limited literature exist in this area in the country. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to discuss nursing researcher as a mentor in tertiary health institutions in the Gambia.

### **Stages of Mentoring**

The American Psychological Association (2006) identified four stages of mentoring as: the initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition stage. In the initial stage, two individuals enter into a mentoring relationship. Potential mentees search for experienced, successful people whom they admire and perceive as good role models and potential mentors search for talented people who are “coachable.” This stage is described as a period when a potential mentee proves him- or herself worthy of a mentor’s attention. Both parties seek a positive, enjoyable relationship that would justify the extra time and effort required in mentoring.

The cultivation stage is the primary stage of learning and development. During this stage, the mentee learns from the mentor. Two broad mentoring functions are at their peak during this stage. The career-related function often emerges first when the mentor coaches the mentee on how to work effectively and efficiently. The psychosocial function emerges after the mentor and mentee have established an interpersonal bond. Within this function, the mentor accepts and confirms the mentee’s professional identity and the relationship matures into a strong friendship. The cultivation stage is generally a positive one for both mentor and mentee. The mentor teaches the mentee valuable lessons gained from the mentor’s experience and expertise. The mentee may also teach the mentor valuable lessons related to new technologies, new methodologies, and emerging issues in the field. Coaching may be active within or outside the mentee’s organization.

The separation stage generally describes the end of a mentoring relationship. The relationship may end for a number of reasons. There may be nothing left to learn, the mentee may want to establish an independent identity, or the mentor may send the mentee off on his or her own. If the relationship’s end is not accepted by both parties, this stage can be stressful with one party unwilling to accept the loss. Problems between the mentor and mentee arise when only one party wants to terminate the mentoring relationship. Mentees may feel abandoned, betrayed, or unprepared if they perceive the separation to be premature. Mentors may feel betrayed or used if the mentee no longer seeks their counsel or support. During the redefinition stage, both mentor and mentee recognize that their relationship can continue but that it will not be the same as their mentoring relationship. If both parties successfully negotiate through the separation stage, the relationship can evolve into a collegial relationship or social friendship.

Applying this conceptual framework to nursing faculty, the 4 phases for effective mentoring programmes can be found in a TEAM approach: take-on, engagement, achievement, and maintenance. In the take-on phase, appropriate mentors and mentees within the nursing school are assigned. As in any match, the mentor and mentee should have common interests, career goals, and backgrounds. In the engagement phase, the mentor and mentee are introduced and begin to establish and agree on goals for the programmes. These goals can be both

personal and professional developmental goals that encompass the mission and vision of the organization to achieve excellence in education, research, and scholarship (Hughes, 2004). In the achievement phase, the mentor and mentee work diligently towards their established goals. They meet frequently, and the mentee provides updates to the mentor. In turn, the mentor seeks challenges and opportunities to foster the mentee's development. Finally, in the maintenance phase, the mentee is self-sufficient and integrated into the culture of the organization. The relationship between the mentor and mentee may transform into a peer relationship, but the goal of the TEAM approach is that partnership and collaboration remain intact

### **Qualities of a Good Mentor**

Mentor-mentee relationships are multifaceted. Students have cited positive qualities in mentors including approachability, a positive attitude, and being a role model (Wilkes, 2006). Mentors are valued for their teaching skills and desire to provide support. A good mentor was described as someone who possesses appropriate professional attributes, knowledge, good communication skills and the motivation to teach and support students (Davies, Neary, & Phillips, 1994). Students describe good mentors as approachable, confident in their own ability, good communicators, professional, organized, enthusiastic, friendly, possessing a sense of humour, caring, patient and understanding. All these characteristics have been highlighted in previous studies (Orton Prowse, & Millen, 1993; Davies, Neary, & Phillips 1994; Cahill 1996; Phillips, Davies & Neary, 1996). Additional characteristics cited are invariably keen and enthusiastic about their job, yet realistic in their expectations. Mentors listen, guide, educate, criticize constructively, provide insight, succeed, accessible, practical, supportive, specific, caring, and admirable.

### **Mentoring Techniques**

Tips for the mentor to share with the mentees are as follows: 1) Maintain regular contact 2) Always be honest without being judgmental 3) Don't expect to have all the answers 4) Refer the mentee for a skill or knowledge the mentor cannot provide 5) Be clear about expectations and boundaries and 6) Respect confidentiality (University of IOWA Mentoring Manual, 2014).

### **Mentoring Topology**

Formal mentor relationship is a type of relationship that is organized by workplace and organizational that are specifically designed to facilitate the creation and maintenance of such relationships; not necessarily spontaneous (APA, 2006). Formal mentoring programs are generally more effective when mentors voluntarily participate (rather than being drafted or coerced) and are

intrinsically motivated to help mentees (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, in press). Formal programmes vary widely in their methods to match mentors and mentees, and in their preparation of individuals to engage in mentoring. Matching criteria may include professional interests, demographics, geographical location, human interest factors (e.g., hobbies, lifestyles), personality, values, and learning orientation (APA, 2006).

**Informal mentor relationships:** is one that is established spontaneously; largely psychosocial that helps enhance the mentee's self-esteem and confidence by providing emotional support and discovery of common interests (University of IOWA Mentoring Manual, 2014). According to the APA (2006) mentor reaches out to a mentee (or vice versa) and a relationship develops which benefits the mentee's professional development. Due to the spontaneous development, these relationships depend somewhat more on the individuals having things in common and feeling comfortable with each other from the beginning. The relationship may develop out of a specific need by the mentee around a task or situation for guidance, support, or advice. The relationship is most likely to be initiated by the mentee as she or he seeks support around a specific task. This type of relationship might also develop when an established professional needs an early career professional to complete certain tasks within an office or project setting.

Students are not the only group who require mentoring. While faculty can play the role of mentor, they may also be in need of a mentor themselves. Like students, faculty can participate in peer-to-peer mentoring. Senior researchers can mentor junior researchers for developing research programmes, attending research conferences, and strengthening grant-writing skills (Records & Emerson, 2003). In the absence of traditional mentoring by senior faculty, junior faculty can mentor each other, or seek out interdisciplinary faculty for mentorship (Byrne & Keefe, 2002). Relationships such as those between senior and junior faculty often result in strengthened resources and increased productivity (Morrison-Beedy, Aronowitz, Dyne, & Mkandawire, 2001).

**Traditional Face-to-Face Mentoring:** This is a one-to-one or face-to-face process of communication between a more senior or experienced person (the mentor) and another person (the mentee) who requires guidance and assistance. Traditional mentoring is conducted mostly as a face-to-face activity as a pre-arranged meeting somewhere convenient to both mentor and mentee. It is a two-way learning process where helpful personal and reciprocal relationships can be established through the mutual exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

**E-mentoring:** E-mentoring uses email and smart technologies such as online or web-based tools, video links or mobile phones as the main way of communicating between mentor and mentee. It is potentially a powerful way of delivering mentoring to those who are too busy to access mentoring in more traditional

ways. It can reach those in regional or rural locations, or those whose work is mobile rather than office-based.

Disadvantages: Tools such as email lacks the cues associated with face-to-face communication such as facial expressions, posture, dress, social status indicators and vocal cues. These cues may in turn negatively impact on communication and learning.

Advantages of e-mentoring include:

1. Bridging: E-mentoring by distance allows participants to communicate at their convenience and across time zones.
2. Flexibility: Mentees benefit from the flexibility of e-mentoring and further developing their computer skills.
3. Access improvement: E-mentoring allows for mentors who have a disability, mobility issue, home obligation or work schedule to participate in a program. Tele-mentoring has the potential to equalize access to mentors for rural and marginalized students.
4. Generational gaps: E-mentoring encourages younger people to consider being a workplace mentor. Reverse mentoring is a new concept where younger, more tech-savvy, employees mentor senior colleagues less adept at working with new technology.
5. Ecology: On-line mentoring reduces the need to travel and use of paper.
6. Costs: E-mentoring is thought to be less costly and less disruptive to normal working operations.

Multiple Mentoring: Multiple mentoring is a resourceful and practical approach, used mainly in informal mentoring arrangements. It can also be applied in workplace settings when mentoring programmes are introduced to supplement other forms of training and development. In multiple mentoring arrangements, people may draw upon the knowledge and wisdom of several role models as they progress through life. Since individual learning needs change, different mentors are able to offer different expertise in different areas. In a multiple-mentor approach, the mentee is able to choose from several trained mentors within the organization, using one person as a prime mentor. Later, and within the boundaries of confidentiality, all of these mentors can jointly discuss the progress of a given mentee and collaborate to find on the best way forward. This arrangement can work well in nursing where the complexities of shift patterns and remote working could make it difficult for the prime mentor to meet regularly with the mentee.

Group mentoring is a contemporary and emerging approach that matches senior or experienced mentors with multiple mentees within a given organization. The main benefit of group mentoring is the opportunity to undertake large knowledge transfer among several mentees in a group discussion format. In some settings, more than one mentor is used to broaden the perspective and multiple

layers of insight. Although structured as a group, learning is individual and each mentee works on his or her own unique learning needs and development goals. Group mentoring is particularly valuable when the organization has a greater pool of mentees than it does mentor and when mentees have similar roles and responsibilities in the organization or some common learning agenda. To help overcome seniority issues, mentees and mentors within the group can come from all parts of the organization.

### **Mentoring Benefits**

Mentoring benefits everyone involved - mentees, mentors and the institution for which they work. There is little doubt that having a mentor for research is beneficial for the development of the mentee. The mentee gains knowledge and skills, enhanced confidence, and a more defined plan for career and educational advancement. Other benefits include a powerful process for developing reflective learning, developing wider network influence, improved understanding of their role within the organization, airing of ideas and introduction to new ideas, improved morale, increased confidence and self-awareness, increased creativity and innovation, developing clearer goals and direction, realizing professional aspirations.

Benefits for the mentor are equally as important, although less apparent. The mentor gains a greater sense of ability in using leadership skills, as well as the personal satisfaction of exerting beneficial influence upon the development of a novice (Lynn, 2006). It can help experienced people and those new to the workplace to build skills, define career pathways, overcome workplace stresses and improve overall wellbeing. Further benefits for the mentor are gaining valuable experience from other groups within the sector, developing interpersonal and leadership skills, opportunity to nurture and extend professional networks, satisfaction from enabling others to develop, learning the art of reflective dialogue, achieving clear goals and direction from learning, challenging discussions with people who have a fresh perspective, gaining additional recognition and respect.

Benefits for the Institution includes creating an environment that fosters personal and professional growth, sharing desired institutions, information, skills, behaviours and attitudes, enhancing leadership and coaching skills amongst mentors, improve staff morale, performance and motivation, engage, retain and develop performers .

### **Mentoring Challenges**

While fulfilling such demanding responsibilities, mentors have to face various challenges. These include limitations on time, student teaching, and high workload (Bennett 2003), the mentor's own personality, the student's level of

learning, the number of students allocated to a mentor (Moseley and Davies 2008), and the high level of commitment required (Mills, Francis & Bonner, 2005). Other challenges include collaboration between the student's teacher and mentor, the mentor's knowledge about the theoretical aspect of learning, learning theories, assessment methods and ways to provide constructive feedback. According to Wilkes (2006) challenges for mentor includes lack of resources or time and an inability to balance the many expectations set forth, attitude and poor communication skills.

### **The Gambian Experience**

The Gambia is amongst the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US\$ 560 (IMF Staff Report, 2011). The Gambia is ranked 172 out of 187 countries in the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2014). Adult literacy rate was 51.1%, youths 15-24 years was 72.6 boys and 63.6 for girls for 2008-2012 (UNICEF, 2013).

The structure of the education system in the Gambia provides for the expanded vision for basic education (Early Childhood Education, Basic Education 1-9, and adult and non- formal education) and secondary education. The formal system is characterized by nine years of uninterrupted basic education followed by three years of secondary education and four years of post-secondary or tertiary and higher education. In the provision of post-secondary education, there are presently four main tertiary public institutions in the Gambia that together provides a variety of programs at the post graduate level.

As a developing country, the Gambia has limited tertiary health institutions; five (5) nursing training schools with only four public training nursing school and one private; The Gambia College School of Nursing and Midwifery, an institution under the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, trains State Registered Nurses (SRN) at the certificate level for a period of three years; the School of State Enrolled Nursing trains state enrolled nurses (SEN) for a period of two years and whose training is not as rigorous as the SRN (due to lower academic qualification), the Community Health Nursing (CHN) School trains community health nurses with a very different orientation village –base for two years (Sey-Sawo, Bah, & Kanteh, 2017). The Department of Nursing and Reproductive Health under the School of Medicine and allied Health Sciences is one of the departments of the University of the Gambia (UTG) which was established by an Act of Parliament in 1999. It trains bachelor's degree in general nursing that same year and in 2011 a master's degree programme in nursing was established to begin developing nurses at the graduate level. While the American International University (AIU)- a private institution, trains bachelor's degree in general nursing and other specialized areas such as peri-operative, anesthesia, and psychiatric for three years (Sey-Sawo, Bah, & Kanteh, 2017).



The advent of higher nursing education (under and post graduate) in the Gambia is very recent. In order to keep pace with increasing demand for nursing services coupled with rising academic and professional standards, nursing researchers have begun to evolve in tertiary nursing training institutions in the country, though very limited in number. Nursing research has been incorporated into the curricula of the Gambia College, School of Nursing & Midwifery, UTG and AIU, where all nursing lecturers in these training institutions are expected to be nursing researchers and serve as research supervisors to students.

Three activities contribute to the academic mentoring relationship. First, academic mentors educate the mentee in a particular subject or skill, serving as masters to developing apprentices. Second, academic mentors, as role models, orient the mentee to the ethics, values, and protocols of the nursing profession. Third, they provide psychological support for the mentee, recognizing the rigors of graduate study and applauding success while building self-esteem and confidence.

In these tertiary nursing schools, mentorship is not based on specialization of the mentor and most nurse researchers are not trained on mentoring skills and techniques to mentor a mentee. Mentorship is informal and the relationship is usually initiated by the mentee as she or he seeks support around a specific task. While the mentor provides academic and psychosocial support that help to enhance the mentee's self-esteem, confidence and discovery of common interests. Nurse researchers serve as research supervisors (this is formalized), which usually takes place towards the final year of the students' programme of study. Very few nurse researchers have training on post graduate certificate/degree in nursing education and yet, they are taking leading roles in academia in these tertiary health institutions. However, none of these nurse researchers has a research grant for conducting nursing research and a few do publish nursing articles outside the Gambia. This is due to none existence of in-country nursing journal (Sey-Sawo, Bah, & Kanteh, 2017) compared to other developing countries such as Nigeria where many research nursing journals are also being produced such as the Nigeria Journal of Nursing, International Professional Nursing Journal, the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria Research Journal. All these journals are produced in a bid to further advance research in nursing and to change the face of practice, education and management in nursing (Osika, 2009). Furthermore, each nurse researcher is assigned at least two or more students to supervise (group supervision) in each cohort of students in about four to five different cohorts in some schools per year. There is no co- supervisor. Moreover, some nurse-researchers feel overwhelmed by large number of students to supervise, coupled with academic teaching and administrative work, resulting in the quality of the supervision been compromised. Research has shown that supervisors do not need to be considered "mentors" by students in order to be perceived as good supervisors (Baker & Griffin, 2010).

Furthermore, students' research project, thesis or dissertation writing supervised by a faculty, provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn about and participate in nursing research. These research projects are mandatory academic exercises where each student must submit a research project work in order to qualify for graduation from their respective programme of study after which the project is marked and graded. Apart from being an academic exercise, the goal is to develop nursing research skills by experiencing the research process through the supervision of a research supervisor. The students learn the fundamentals of nursing research as they functioned as student researchers, actively participating throughout the research project. With more nurses getting involved in identifying problems in clinical practice, and search for answers using scientific method are acquiring knowledge and at the same time being developed in the area of research. Report also indicate that African nurses' roles in research productivity and policy development and implementation through research are limited (Munjanja, Kibuka & Dovlo, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

Mentoring has long been recognized as a powerful tool in career development. Advice and support from mentors are among the most important factors in determining the success of students' education and grooming future generation of professional nurses and researchers in the Gambia. Mentors must reawaken the sleeping potentials within their students which would otherwise be wasted and devise methods to sharpen the mentees' intellectual skills. Therefore, nursing researchers in Tertiary Health Institutions in the Gambia need training on mentorship skills in promoting excellence in education, research and health care delivery even though the relationship is informal.

### **Recommendations**

1. Tertiary health institutions in the Gambia should conduct in service training on mentoring skills for nurse researchers.
2. Training nurse researchers on post graduate courses in education is a dire need
3. More published studies from nurse researchers are highly needed to improve nursing education and patient health outcomes and influence health policy in the country.
4. The establishment of an in country nursing journal is warranted.
5. Formalization of mentorship between nurse researchers and mentees

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