Preparing BSW Students for Practice and a First-Year Professor for Teaching: The Potential for Mentoring to Assist Both Transitions

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between a mentor and a new faculty member in a Department of Social Work, and examines how elements of this mentoring experience were mirrored in the interactions between the new faculty member and her students. More specifically, elements of the mentoring relationship such as the mentor showing care for the protégé and acting in the protégé’s best interest; assisting in the developing self-perception of the protégé; offering validation of the protégé’s strengths; and creating a sense of common ground, trust, and shared learning were echoed in the protégé’s teaching experiences with students who were preparing for graduation. The paper goes on to critically examine the role mentoring experiences might have in supporting both transitions of new faculty into academia as well as transitions of BSW students and first year social workers into practice.

A Mentoring Relationship in Context

Most doctoral students receive little information or training regarding their roles and expectations as future faculty members in academia, and therefore can feel unprepared in their first years as professors. Further, new faculty members are often expected to develop this knowledge and skills through “osmosis” (Frongia, 1995), which is inadequate as most teaching and scholarly work within academia occur in isolation. While mentoring experiences are given scant attention within Schools and Departments of Social Work, they can be a valuable means of easing the transition for new faculty members (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002). This paper explores the mentoring experiences of a first-year instructor (Sue) and her mentor (Brian) while developing and teaching a course entitled, “Trauma and Social Work Practice,” an elective at the 3rd and 4th year undergraduate level of a BSW program.

The course was developed and taught as the teaching internship component of Sue’s doctoral studies in Social Work, which required the involvement of a mentor, and it was within this context that Sue elicited Brian’s participation as mentor in the process. Sue had invited Brian to accept this role, because of his areas of expertise in direct practice and, more specifically, in mental health and crisis intervention, as well as his strong teaching record. This paper has as its focus reflections on both the evolution of the
mentoring relationship and unexpected benefits of this mentoring experience on students’ preparation for practice.

Recently, there have been a number of articles written on mentoring in higher education (Brennan, 2000; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gilner, 2001; Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Gibson, 2004), although almost no attention has been paid to mentoring in social work education (Robbins, 1989; Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002). Given that some faculty believe they do not require mentors (Boice, 1991) and others have initially viewed such experiences as “irrelevant and a form of coddling” (Nason-Clark, 2004), new faculty members may experience a degree of trepidation and uncertainty about the process. Further, no single comprehensive definition of mentoring (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002; Bogat & Redner, 1985) or common description of the roles of mentoring (Gibson, 2004) have emerged from a review of the literature. More classical definitions reflect a unidirectional flow of learning and information, while others describe a more collaborative experience. If new faculty members are influenced by a structural or feminist worldview, classical definitions and descriptions of mentoring do not ease their potential concerns. For example, Blackwell describes mentoring experiences in which people of “superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as protégés” (1989, p. 9), and Robbins defines mentorship as “one person consciously serving as a role model and preceptor to another in a career area” (1989, p. 1). For educators with a structural/feminist worldview, such descriptions delineate a mentor-protégé relationship that is uncomfortably traditional, hierarchical, and unidirectional in its recognized benefits.

Given the context in which this mentoring relationship originated, Sue originally envisioned a mentoring experience that reflected traditional definitions. She was aware of being in a dual role of both junior colleague and doctoral student in relation to Brian, a senior faculty member in the department. Parameters of the mentoring role were formally set according to guidelines set out for the internship, for which Sue would be graded. Further, Sue was in a contract position in the department, without long-term job security. Due to these circumstances that set inherent expectations on power imbalances in the relationship, she foresaw a fairly traditional form of mentoring experience.

Brian, on the other hand, envisioned a significantly different type of mentoring experience. Influenced by his worldview and desire for equality in the relationship, and knowing that cross-gender mentoring matches can be especially problematic for women (Goldstein, 1979; Morrison & Van Glinow, 1990), in preparation for this experience he sought out descriptions of mentoring in the literature that would better align with his values. Certainly, the portrayal of the mentoring relationship as a “symbiotic partnership” was useful (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981), but Parker Palmer’s understanding that mutuality is a cornerstone of a mentoring experience most accurately reflected Brian’s position on mentoring (1998). This concept emphasizes “the efforts of two or more people to act together . . . to achieve benefits for each” (Barker, 1995, p. 243). Similarly, others have recommended the elements of reciprocity and partnership in their conceptualizations of mentoring relationships (Healey & Welchert, 1990; Stalker, 1994).
While the primary goal of mentoring is to assist the newer faculty member to adjust to and succeed in academia, research in social work education suggests this is best achieved when the mentoring relationship “progress[s] into a more collegial relationship” and when “common interests, compatible personalities, and mutual respect and learning” are present (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002, p. 330).

**Evolution of the Mentoring Experience**

Despite inherent power inequities that were imbedded in this context, which would discourage the development of a reciprocal mentoring relationship, Brian created space for such a mentoring experience. Brian quickly set a tone of collaboration and excitement over shared learning. For example, he acknowledged having limited knowledge of trauma theory—the subject of the undergraduate course in question—and expressed interest in developing this knowledge base through the mentoring experience. Further, while Sue had initially asked if he would sit in on one class in order to observe and give feedback on her teaching style and strategies, Brian suggested instead that he attend every class of the course. While this could be perceived as threatening for a protégé, he explained his involvement as a means to learn about trauma theory and to enhance their discussions regarding Sue’s teaching of the course. Brian’s focus on mutual gain through the mentoring experience was apparent from their first discussions together, an attitude that has been recognized as valuable in the literature. New social work faculty members have expressed appreciation of mentors “who were willing to learn from their protégés and acknowledge their expertise” (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002, p. 328). Similarly, new women faculty members have described value when they “felt that they were treated as colleagues and that the mentor also received benefits from being a participant in the relationship” (Gibson, 2004, p. 183).

Soon after agreeing that Brian would attend all classes in Sue’s course, the pair discussed the potential benefits of Sue observing his teaching. Together, they decided that Sue would attend all classes for one of Brian’s courses so that she could gain from the experience of seeing his teaching at different phases of the course. Brian was also eager to gain from Sue’s observations, seeing this as an opportunity both to share his teaching expertise but also to reflect on his teaching and the course curriculum. Brian had planned to use this term as an opportunity to reflect on needed changes for this particular course, and he felt that Sue’s attendance offered him a fresh vantage point from which to explore potential improvements. Brian modeled openness as he shared both his passions and challenges in teaching this course. In turn, this approach encouraged Sue to share her questions, doubts and challenges regarding her teaching of the trauma course.

Because both Brian and Sue made a commitment to regularly attend each other’s classes and complete all required readings, their weekly consultations were rich areas for discussion without any need to “fill the other in” on what had occurred in class. During these meetings both were also able to reflect on and ask questions about teaching strategies that the other had used in their respective classes. As this supportive environment developed, Sue became more comfortable to experiment with new strategies and styles in her teaching role.
Trust and safety between the pair were also developed during the planning for the trauma course. Both were aware that there is potential to experience strong emotional reactions and even vicarious traumatization in response to some of the course material. Both for those who have experienced trauma as well as those without trauma histories, authors have raised concerns about the potential to suffer vicarious traumatization in classes that include trauma content (Graziano, 2001; McCammon, 1995; Miller, 2001; O’Halloran & O’Halloran, 2001). For example, those who have experienced past trauma may revisit painful memories triggered by course material. Others who have not experienced trauma in their own lives, on the other hand, may be challenged by “shattered assumptions” as they face material that disputes their cognitive schemas (e.g., safety schema), beliefs (e.g., beliefs in a just world) and/or assumptions (McCammon, 1995). Given these potential challenges, Sue and Brian chose to share with each other any trauma experiences in their own lives, and this discussion deepened mutual trust and understanding.

An area of interest for Sue and Brian related to how their mentoring experience affected students in the trauma course. Because Brian would be attending all classes, the mentoring experience was very visible to students. The pair chose to make elements of the mentoring transparent to the class. For example, during the first class of the term Sue introduced Brian to students and described the parameters of his role. As the course continued, she at times mentioned in class the content of discussions and learnings that arose during their weekly meetings that she felt would also benefit students’ learning. As the mentoring experience evolved and began to include and inform interactions with students, unexpected learnings occurred for the pair.

**Benefits of the Mentoring Relationship**

While the literature does not suggest a single comprehensive definition of mentoring or a common description of mentoring roles, a model has been advanced that recognizes mentoring as fulfilling two broad and distinct functions: career functions (such as development of teaching or research skills), and psychosocial functions (such as emotional support, affirmation and role modeling) (Kram, 1983). Gibson (2004) expands further on these ideas through her study of women faculty who have been mentored, suggesting that several essential themes were important in “explicating the nature and meaning” of their mentoring experiences. She posits that in order to understand true mentoring relationships, “the definition of mentoring is less important than whether these essential themes exist in the relationship” (p. 184). In exploring the value and meaning of the evolving mentoring relationship, Gibson’s five themes are useful in framing the experience.

The first theme involves protégés having someone genuinely care about their wellbeing and act in their best interest. Protégés perceive this caring in a variety of ways, including mentors’ openness to being asked for advice, giving advice that is in the protégé’s best interest, helping protégés to improve their self-perceptions, and being perceived as wanting to act in the mentoring role. The second theme of mentoring involves protégés
experiencing a clear connection with their mentor. Protégés view mentors as having particular expertise that they are willing to share “in a way that expresses their humanity” (p. 180), and describe a perception of common ground, trust, acceptance by their mentors, and their own acceptance of mentors’ imperfections as elements of this connection. Gibson’s third theme involves protégés receiving affirmation and validation of their worth from their mentors, as mentors give credit to protégés, and validate protégés’ talents and accomplishments. The fourth theme involves protégés not feeling alone in their work experiences. They describe mentors offering inside perspectives on the culture and norms of academia, and treating protégés as colleagues. And important to the upcoming discussion, protégés also describe another aspect of not feeling isolated in their work experience—they describe a “transmission of mentoring” in which protégés become interested in mentoring others due to the value they find in the experience (p. 182). The final theme involves recognition that their mentoring experiences are affected by institutional politics.

Returning to this particular mentoring experience, Sue as protégé experienced elements of each of these themes in the mentoring relationship, but for the purpose of this discussion attention will be given to the first four themes. Brian showed caring and concern for Sue’s best interests in his mentoring. His expressed interest to take on the mentoring role, the suggestion to attend all classes, and his agreement to regular meetings through the term reflected clear commitment to his role and the learning experience. A strong collaborative connection was also built as Brian shared his challenges as well as his areas of expertise in teaching. He highlighted common ground between himself and Sue regarding their desire as teachers to clearly connect theory to skill development, and to assist students emotionally and practically for their transition into practice. Brian frequently acknowledged and affirmed both the content Sue was teaching and her teaching style and strategies. While assisting in Sue’s evolving understanding of teaching norms and expectations within the university community, he treated the relationship as collegial in which he too could develop knowledge and skills. Finally, as the term unfolded and Sue recognized the rich learning that occurred through the mentoring experience, her interest in “transmission of mentoring” grew. While unplanned, observation of Brian’s characteristics in his mentoring role influenced Sue’s teaching style and her focus on assisting students in preparation for their transition into practice. In looking back on the teaching experience, many developments in her teaching reflected elements of Gibson’s themes of a mentoring experience, and echoed Brian’s style in working with her. For example, she took significant care in creating a safe learning environment in the class to support students’ integration of course material in preparation for practice. Given the nature of the course content, she incorporated strategies to assist students in effectively managing the learning of material that could evoke painful reactions. Strategies incorporated in the class included discussing with students how to create safety within the classroom and developing class guidelines to reflect students’ needs; teaching about vicarious traumatization and strategies to minimize common effects; normalizing intense feelings in response to the course content and modeling strategies for managing such feelings; informing students in advance of the content area to be covered in each upcoming class; and including three sets of written reflections in which students could incorporate personal reactions to the course material.
Student feedback at the end of the term demonstrated perceptions of Sue’s caring and acting in their best interests, leading to development of a trusting connection with her. A number of students chose to disclose personal histories of trauma in their written reflections, while others met with her related to their management of emotional elements of course material. Sue also built on this connection a number of times during the course by disclosing challenges and learnings from her own professional practice. For example, while teaching about vicarious traumatization Sue mentioned a time in her work history when she recognized emotional impacts of working with individuals related to their histories of trauma, and described strategies she developed to manage these challenges. This sharing was influenced by Brian’s willingness to impart his knowledge in their mentoring relationship in a way that also expressed his humanity.

There were a number of opportunities Sue took in order to improve students’ self-perceptions as practitioners. In response to assignments and role plays in class, she routinely began with feedback that explored students’ growing capabilities and evident skills. Acknowledgement and appreciation of students’ knowledge and accomplishments was also expressed in a variety of ways. For example, she described to the class how much she had learned in reading their research papers, invited students to reflect on their most significant learnings gleaned from writing these papers, and in the following class each student shared these learnings with their peers.

Not only did elements of these mentoring themes develop in Sue’s work with students, but these same elements also transpired amongst students in the class. In particular, a skill development component of the course involved role playing in which students had the opportunity over several weeks to practice trauma assessment skills. Drama students were hired to act as “clients” in initial meetings with a “social worker.” These role plays were carried out in class, and were later also completed as part of a course assignment. For this assignment, in dyads students conducted and audiotaped a role play as a social worker assessing and beginning intervention with an individual experiencing trauma. These role plays were conducted outside of class, and involved the client (drama student), and two students (one to act as the social worker, and the other to act as the worker’s colleague with whom she/he could collaborate). Students in each pair had the opportunity to act both as the social worker and as the observing colleague in response to different scenarios and clients. Students were told that if at any time while conducting the role play assessment they wished to pause, they could do so to consult with their partner for feedback, suggestions or support.

While many students described their initial reaction to participating in the role plays as daunting, later in the process many of them reflected positively on their experiences, gaining confidence in their abilities to respond effectively to those in distress. In their subsequent written reflections of the assignment, almost every student in the course mentioned that the support and collaboration with their dyad partner was helpful in their skill development as was their opportunity to in turn support their partner. Students expressed caring about the others’ evolving self confidence in their abilities for practice, credited each other on their assessment skills, described areas of learning they had
gleaned from the other, and expressed feeling supported and affirmed in their capabilities to assess for trauma at a level they were not expecting. These elements of Gibson’s themes of a mentoring relationship were also evident in students’ feedback to one another during role plays in class. It seems apparent that these valued themes in the mentoring relationship between Brian and Sue influenced her teaching approach and her relationships with students, and also modeled elements of relationships that were encouraged amongst students in the class. While genuine care, acting in protégés’ best interests, developing connections, affirming and validating protégés’ abilities and talents, and fostering a sense of shared learning are essential themes in a mentoring experience of a junior faculty member, it can be argued that BSW students in their final year before entering practice may find as much value in such an experience.

**Where to From Here?**

As stated earlier, mentoring relationships are given infrequent attention in social work academic settings. When developed, however, they most frequently occur between junior and senior faculty members, or between graduate students and faculty members, and tend to focus attention on scholarship rather than teaching (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002). It could be posited that elements of Gibson’s themes of mentoring would also be of value between faculty members and undergraduate students preparing for graduation. In some regions of Canada, such as New Brunswick, this may be particularly pertinent as the majority of Bachelor of Social Work graduates move directly into practice because graduate programs are not particularly accessible. Further, mentoring relationships are offered very infrequently to BSW graduates upon their entrance into practice (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002). Therefore, most first year social workers step into a profession known for its stress, frequent ethical dilemmas, and high rate of burnout without the benefits described by many protégés of a mentoring experience.

Creative attention should be given to ways in which mentoring experiences can be more frequently offered to those facing transitions and their related challenges—new social work faculty members adjusting to the teaching and scholarship rigors of academia, BSW students preparing for the transition from school into practice, and new social workers developing their skills in the field. Mentoring, however, can be a time intensive experience, which suggests challenges in sustaining such relationships both in university settings and in social work practice. Particularly given evidence suggesting that longer mentoring relationships are most helpful in a protégé’s growth and performance (Querelt, 1982, as cited in Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002), support for such experiences cannot be entered into lightly. However, the intensity and time commitment for mentoring tend to lessen over time (Gibson, 2004; Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002) as the protégés’ needs that are being met through the mentoring diminish. What seems most crucial is that early in a career, new workers have the opportunity for mentoring and have some stability in this relationship so that the diminishing intensity of the experience over time coincides with the protégé’s needs. In order for mentoring programs to have a solid chance of success, the working context—be that an academic institution or field agency—will need to be made conducive to the experience with resources and collegial support. Given the value placed on the experience by protégés and the performance
records of those who have experienced mentoring early in their careers, further exploration of the potential for mentoring experiences for new faculty, BSW students, and new social workers seems an advisable endeavor.

**Bibliography**


