

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES OF A MENTOR IN A TEACHING CAREER

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Abstract: *Mentorship within the teaching profession is integral to fostering professional development, equipping mentees with guidance, support, and reflective practices essential for their growth. This article examines the critical qualities of effective mentors, including empathy, integrity, advanced communication skills, adaptability, and reflective practices. Empathy forms the foundation of trust, while active listening deepens the mentor-mentee connection. Integrity and authenticity enhance credibility, inspiring ethical behavior in mentees. Effective communication ensures the seamless transfer of knowledge and facilitates problem-solving, while flexibility allows mentors to provide personalized guidance. Reflective practice underpins continuous improvement for both mentors and mentees, solidifying mentorship as a collaborative and transformative experience. These attributes collectively enrich the mentorship process, equipping educators to navigate the multifaceted challenges of the teaching profession.*

Key words: *mentorship; empathy; communication skills; reflective practice; adaptability; professional development.*

Qualities that make an effective mentor in education

Mentoring plays a critical role in the development of educators, offering a framework for professional growth and enhancing both teaching skills

and reflective practices. As Stan (2018) emphasizes, mentorship is a dual process, where both the mentor and mentee grow. Mentorship in teaching is uniquely challenging, requiring a blend of empathy, communication, and professional expertise (Stan, 2018). This paper analyzes the core qualities that make an effective mentor in education, drawing on insights from scholarly work and practical guides.

1. Empathy and active listening. Empathy serves as a foundational quality in effective mentoring within education, shaping the mentor-mentee relationship by fostering a sense of support, trust, and openness. A mentor's ability to empathize – to truly understand and feel the mentee's experiences and challenges – creates a nurturing environment, where mentees feel safe to express their vulnerabilities and professional uncertainties. According to Johnson and Ridley (2018), empathy is not merely a passive trait, but an active skill that mentors must cultivate, in order to build authentic relationships. They assert that empathy in mentoring involves perceiving the mentee's emotions and professional struggles with sensitivity, which forms the bedrock for mutual trust. Trust, in turn, is essential for effective mentoring, as it provides a secure space, where mentees can openly share their concerns, reflect on their practices, and seek guidance without fear of judgment or repercussions (Johnson & Ridley, 2018).

A significant aspect of empathy in mentoring is the practice of active listening, which Johnson and Ridley (2018) emphasize as critical for deepening understanding and connection. Active listening goes beyond merely hearing words; it requires mentors to engage fully, showing through verbal and nonverbal cues that they are genuinely interested in what the mentee is saying. This approach not only validates the mentee's feelings and experiences, but also encourages open dialogue, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to meaningful growth. Through active listening, mentors can better understand the underlying concerns of their mentees, thereby strengthening the professional bond and enhancing the mentorship's overall effectiveness (Johnson & Ridley, 2018).

Expanding on these ideas, Hudson (2013) argues that empathy in mentoring requires understanding the unique contexts in which each mentee operates, recognizing that each individual brings a distinct set of experiences, challenges, and strengths to the relationship. Hudson posits that empathy involves not only emotional attunement but also a contextual awareness, that allows mentors to tailor their guidance to the specific needs and circumstances of the mentee. For example, a mentor working with a new teacher in a low-resource school might need to demonstrate empathy by acknowledging the stress of managing large class sizes with limited materials, offering practical advice grounded in these particular challenges. By adapting their guidance to fit the realities

that mentees face, mentors can provide more relevant, actionable support, that aligns with the mentees' professional journey, thereby fostering resilience and growth.

Moreover, Hudson (2013) suggests that empathy in mentoring creates a pathway for mutual development, benefiting both the mentor and mentee. When mentors actively listen and empathize with their mentees' challenges, they gain fresh perspectives that can enhance their own professional insights and practices. This dynamic of reciprocal learning underscores the value of empathy as a two-way process that enriches both participants, transforming mentoring into a collaborative effort rather than a one-sided relationship. Hudson's research indicates that mentors who consistently engage in empathetic, active listening create a mentorship culture that values the mentee's voice and individuality, which ultimately promotes a deeper, more authentic connection that supports long-term professional growth for both parties (Hudson, 2013).

2. Integrity and authenticity. Another important quality in mentorship is integrity. According to Johnson and Ridley (2018), integrity in mentorship involves a commitment to honest and ethical communication. Mentors must model authentic behavior, providing truthful feedback and demonstrating professional values. This integrity builds credibility, which in turn helps mentees develop a sense of responsibility and ethical standards within their own practices (Johnson & Ridley, 2018).

Authenticity, as Schön (1983) discusses in *The Reflective Practitioner*, involves mentors engaging in reflective practices that reveal their true teaching philosophy and values. Reflective mentors not only guide the mentees, but also share personal insights into professional challenges, making the mentoring process transparent and relatable. Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner highlights how mentors can serve as role models, showing mentees how to navigate the complexities of teaching through honesty and openness (Schön, 1983).

3. Flexibility and adaptability. Flexibility is a mentoring relationship feature, as each mentee's needs and goals may vary. Hudson (2013) emphasizes that mentors should adapt their approaches to suit the individual mentee's developmental stage and learning style. Flexibility allows mentors to shift strategies based on feedback, maintaining relevance and effectiveness in their guidance (Hudson, 2013). This adaptive approach is particularly crucial in education, where teaching environments and policies are constantly evolving (Fullan, 2007).

Fullan (2007) explains that educational change is a dynamic process, requiring educators to continuously adapt. Mentors who demonstrate flexibility not only model adaptability, but also help mentees prepare for inevitable changes in the educational landscape. By embodying this adaptability, mentors encourage mentees to view change as an

opportunity for growth, fostering resilience in their professional careers (Fullan, 2007).

4. Communication skills. Effective communication stands as a cornerstone of successful mentoring, playing a main role in shaping the quality and impact of the mentor-mentee relationship. Clutterbuck (2004) posits that effective communication in mentoring is multifaceted, encompassing not only the mentor's ability to share knowledge but also the essential skills of active listening, thoughtful questioning, and the delivery of constructive feedback. Clutterbuck emphasizes that when mentors communicate effectively, they create an open, collaborative space where expectations are clear, goals are aligned, and mentees feel supported in their professional development. This clarity and openness foster a positive mentorship experience, where mentees are encouraged to engage actively, ask questions, and experiment with new approaches to their work (Clutterbuck, 2004). A critical element of effective communication in mentorship is the mentor's ability to listen actively. This involves paying full attention to the mentee's concerns and responses, reflecting on their words, and refraining from interrupting or prematurely offering solutions. By practicing active listening, mentors signal respect for the mentee's perspective and demonstrate their commitment to understanding the mentee's unique challenges and goals. Clutterbuck (2004) suggests that active listening enhances the mentor's ability to provide advice that resonates with the mentee's needs, as mentors can better gauge which areas require more guidance or encouragement. Active listening reinforces the mentor's role as a supportive figure, allowing mentees to feel validated and empowered to explore their professional capabilities without hesitation.

Questioning also is a key aspect of effective communication, as mentors must skillfully pose questions that provoke critical thinking and reflection. Rather than simply providing direct answers, effective mentors use open-ended questions to stimulate mentees' self-assessment and problem-solving skills, guiding them to find personalized solutions to their challenges. Clutterbuck (2004) notes that mentors who ask purposeful, relevant questions not only encourage mentees to reflect on their actions and decisions but also help them gain insight into their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This questioning approach promotes a deeper level of learning, as it leads mentees to engage more fully in their developmental process, becoming active participants in their growth rather than passive recipients of advice.

Providing constructive feedback is another fundamental communication skill that mentors must master to enhance the mentorship experience. Constructive feedback involves delivering observations in a supportive, balanced manner that highlights both strengths and areas for improvement. Clutterbuck (2004) emphasizes that feedback should be

specific, actionable, and framed positively to foster a growth mindset in the mentee. By focusing on practical suggestions and reinforcing positive behaviors, mentors can help mentees build confidence while addressing challenges. This approach not only aids the mentee's development but also strengthens the trust and rapport between mentor and mentee, as feedback delivered with sensitivity and encouragement enhances the overall relationship dynamic.

In the context of educational mentorship, Stan (2018) highlights the importance of communication skills in enabling mentors to translate complex pedagogical concepts into clear, accessible guidance, that mentees can readily apply in their teaching practices. Stan argues that effective communication in educational settings requires mentors to simplify educational theories and adapt their language and examples to match the mentee's experience level. This clarity allows mentees to understand abstract theories within the context of their day-to-day teaching challenges, making it easier for them to implement new strategies in the classroom. By breaking down complex ideas into practical steps, mentors can enhance the mentee's confidence, equipping them with tools to improve their instructional techniques and classroom management skills (Stan, 2018).

Clear communication in educational mentorship fosters an environment where mentees feel comfortable asking questions, seeking clarification, and experimenting with new teaching methods. Stan (2018) emphasizes that mentors who communicate openly and transparently contribute to building a culture of continuous learning and reflection, where mentees are encouraged to refine their practices and explore innovative approaches to pedagogy. This open communication not only supports mentees' immediate development, but also lays the foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability in their teaching careers, as they become accustomed to reflecting on their methods and seeking feedback. In sum, communication skills are essential in mentoring relationships, particularly in education, where mentors must convey complex ideas in ways that are clear, accessible, and actionable. Through active listening, effective questioning, and constructive feedback, mentors can create an environment that supports mentees' professional growth and confidence. As Clutterbuck (2004) and Stan (2018) highlight, communication skills enable mentors to bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that mentees gain both the knowledge and the practical tools needed to excel in their teaching roles. This effective communication not only strengthens the mentor-mentee relationship, but also enhances the overall quality and impact of the mentoring process.

5. Supportive and non-directive guidance. An effective mentor empowers mentees to develop their own teaching styles rather than

imposing rigid directives. Hudson (2013) suggests that mentors should act as facilitators, encouraging mentees to explore their personal approaches to teaching. This non-directive guidance fosters independence, allowing mentees to build self-confidence and professional identity (Hudson, 2013).

Lave and Wenger's theory of Situated Learning (1991) reinforces this approach, as they argue that learning occurs through legitimate peripheral participation. Mentors who encourage mentees to gradually take on more responsibility facilitate a more natural and effective learning process. By allowing mentees to engage actively in their own development, mentors create a supportive environment that emphasizes growth through experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

6. Reflective practice. Reflective practice represents a fundamental component of effective mentorship, serving as a mechanism through which mentees can cultivate self-awareness, critical thinking, and a continuous improvement mindset. Schön (1983) introduces the concept of the "reflective practitioner", emphasizing that professionals who engage in reflective practice actively evaluate their decisions and actions, analyzing both successes and failures to glean insights that guide future behavior. This ongoing self-assessment is particularly valuable in mentorship, as mentors who model reflective practices provide mentees with a blueprint for self-improvement. By demonstrating how to thoughtfully analyze and learn from professional experiences, mentors help mentees adopt a reflective approach to their own work, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and self-enhancement (Schön, 1983).

Reflective practice in mentorship enables mentees to move beyond routine execution of tasks toward a more thoughtful, intentional approach to their teaching. Schön (1983) argues that reflective practitioners are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable, constantly refining their methods in response to situational demands and feedback. Mentors who engage in reflective practice make a powerful impact on mentees by revealing how introspection can inform and enhance their teaching. For instance, a mentor might share insights from a recent lesson that did not go as planned, explaining how they identified areas for improvement and adjusted their approach. This transparency shows mentees that even experienced educators face challenges, but that growth comes from a willingness to learn and adapt rather than from always achieving perfect results. The importance of reflective practice is further supported by Hattie (2009), who underlines the role of evidence-based reflection in effective teaching. In "Visible Learning", Hattie synthesizes research on educational practices and concludes that self-reflection allows educators to identify which methods yield the best outcomes, thus directly enhancing student achievement. Hattie (2009) argues that reflection is a vital tool for understanding the impact of

various teaching strategies, as it encourages educators to assess the effectiveness of their practices systematically. For mentors, engaging in reflective practice and sharing evidence-based findings with mentees sets a strong example of professional accountability. By adopting an evidence-based approach, mentors demonstrate that reflection is not only introspective, but also data-informed, reinforcing the idea that teaching should be a dynamic process rooted in ongoing assessment and refinement. Through reflective practice, mentors encourage mentees to become more self-directed learners who are capable of evaluating their teaching independently. Hattie (2009) highlights that when mentors model a reflective approach, they instill in mentees a sense of responsibility for their own professional development. This autonomy empowers mentees to analyze their methods critically and make informed adjustments based on their observations and student feedback. Such an approach aligns with the concept of "visible learning," where educators make their thought processes explicit and evaluate teaching outcomes systematically. For mentees, observing reflective practice in their mentors offers a practical framework for assessing their own effectiveness, helping them understand that successful teaching is a continuous cycle of action, reflection, and adjustment. Reflective practice in mentorship allows for a personalized approach to teaching, where mentees are encouraged to explore their unique strengths and challenges rather than conform to a one-size-fits-all model. Schön (1983) emphasizes that reflective practitioners tailor their responses to the particularities of each context, and mentors who embrace this philosophy guide mentees to find individual solutions rather than replicating generalized methods. For instance, a mentor might prompt a mentee to reflect on how their personality or background influences their classroom management style, leading to insights that form a personalized teaching strategy. This approach enables mentees to cultivate a professional identity that is both authentic and adaptable, built on continuous self-assessment rather than rigid adherence to prescriptive methods.

Thus, reflective practice serves as a vital tool in mentorship, helping mentees develop self-awareness, critical thinking, and an evidence-based approach to teaching. Mentors who model reflective practice not only enhance their own effectiveness but also inspire mentees to adopt a growth-oriented mindset that values ongoing learning and adaptation. As Schön (1983) and Hattie (2009) illustrate, reflective practice encourages educators to view each teaching experience as an opportunity for improvement, ultimately fostering a resilient, informed, and adaptive teaching style. This reflective approach benefits both the mentor and mentee, as it cultivates a professional community of educators who are committed to their own development and, by

extension, to the success of their students.

7. Mutual growth and reciprocity. The mentorship relationship should benefit both mentor and mentee, fostering mutual growth. Hudson (2013) notes that a successful mentorship is one where mentors not only provide guidance, but also gain fresh perspectives and insights from their mentees. This reciprocal learning process keeps mentors engaged and continuously improving, enhancing their own teaching practices (Hudson, 2013). Clutterbuck (2004) reinforces this idea, suggesting that mentoring relationships should be viewed as partnerships rather than hierarchical interactions. When mentors see mentees as collaborators, they create an environment of respect and shared learning, which can have long-term benefits for both parties' professional development (Clutterbuck, 2004).

Key challenges in the mentoring career

While mentoring is a profoundly rewarding field, it is not without its challenges. Several common issues can hinder the effectiveness of the mentoring process, potentially impacting both the mentor's and mentee's professional growth. Among these challenges, three prominent issues are: (1) lack of clear boundaries and role clarity, (2) ineffective communication, and (3) limited reflective practice. Each of these issues can diminish the quality of the mentoring relationship if not addressed.

1. Lack of clear boundaries and role clarity. One of the most frequent challenges in mentoring is the absence of clearly defined boundaries and roles, which can lead to confusion, misalignment, and even dependency in the mentoring relationship. Johnson and Ridley (2018) emphasize that mentors need to establish clear roles from the outset, outlining their responsibilities and limitations to ensure a structured relationship. Without well-defined boundaries, mentees may develop unrealistic expectations of their mentors, potentially relying on them too heavily for personal and professional support. This can lead to burnout for mentors, as well as limit the mentee's independence and growth, ultimately undermining the purpose of the mentorship (Johnson & Ridley, 2018). Clutterbuck (2004) further explains that unclear boundaries may also create ethical dilemmas. In educational mentorship, for instance, mentors may find themselves navigating dual relationships—both as supporters and evaluators of mentees' performance. Without a clear framework, mentors might inadvertently cross professional lines, which could lead to discomfort or mistrust within the relationship. Clutterbuck suggests that establishing early agreements on boundaries and expectations helps create a safe, productive mentoring environment that benefits both parties. For this reason, it is good to have a plan!

2. Ineffective communication. Communication difficulties represent another common issue in mentoring, often resulting from either poor

listening skills or a lack of openness. According to Clutterbuck (2004), effective mentoring requires not just the ability to share knowledge, but also the skill to listen actively, ask relevant questions, and provide constructive feedback. Mentors who struggle with communication may inadvertently impose their own views rather than adapting their advice to the unique needs of the mentee. This "mentor-driven" approach can hinder the mentee's development, as they may feel that their own voice and experiences are undervalued.

Stan (2018) argues that ineffective communication is particularly detrimental in the educational field, where mentors need to explain complex pedagogical concepts in an accessible manner. If mentors fail to adjust their language or delivery, mentees may become disengaged or struggle to apply what they learn in practical situations. Poor communication also reduces the mentor's ability to provide useful feedback, which is critical for mentee growth. By not addressing communication issues, mentors risk diminishing the overall impact of the mentorship and limiting the mentee's confidence and competence in their professional journey.

3. Limited reflective practice. A lack of reflective practice can be another major obstacle in the mentoring process, reducing the mentor's ability to assess and refine their approach over time. Schön (1983) highlights that reflective practice enables mentors to analyze their decisions and actions critically, learning from their experiences to improve future mentoring interactions. When mentors do not engage in self-reflection, they may repeat ineffective patterns, overlook valuable lessons from past experiences, and miss opportunities to adapt their methods to meet the mentee's evolving needs. Schön posits that reflective mentors are more likely to create a dynamic, responsive relationship, fostering mentee growth through adaptable guidance.

Hattie (2009) supports the importance of reflection in teaching and mentoring, noting that self-assessment allows mentors to understand which practices yield positive outcomes for mentees. Without reflective practice, mentors may struggle to identify the most effective strategies for supporting their mentees, relying instead on routines or assumptions. This lack of adaptability can stifle the mentee's development and inhibit the mentoring relationship's progress. As Hattie suggests, reflective practice is essential for mentors who aim to engage in evidence-based, effective mentoring that continuously benefits both mentor and mentee.

Conclusions

Effective mentorship in the teaching profession is characterized by a synthesis of key qualities that underpin the mentor-mentee relationship: empathy, integrity, adaptability, advanced communication skills, and reflective practice. These attributes not only facilitate the professional

development of mentees but also contribute to the overall quality and sustainability of the educational profession.

Empathy and active listening, as described by Johnson and Ridley (2018), form the foundation of trust within the mentoring relationship. By fostering an open and supportive environment, mentors enable mentees to express their concerns and reflect on their practices without fear of judgment. Hudson (2013) further emphasizes the importance of contextual awareness in mentoring, which allows mentors to tailor their guidance to the unique challenges faced by individual mentees. Integrity and authenticity, highlighted by Schön (1983), ensure that mentorship is grounded in ethical and transparent practices. By modeling professional values and sharing personal insights, mentors not only build credibility but also serve as role models, inspiring mentees to adopt ethical standards in their own professional conduct. Adaptability, as outlined by Hudson (2013) and Fullan (2007), is critical in the ever-evolving landscape of education. Mentors who demonstrate flexibility in their approaches address the diverse needs of mentees and equip them to navigate the dynamic nature of teaching environments. This adaptability fosters resilience and prepares mentees to embrace change as an opportunity for growth. Advanced communication skills, as discussed by Clutterbuck (2004), are essential for facilitating effective knowledge transfer. Active listening, thoughtful questioning, and constructive feedback enable mentors to foster a collaborative and reflective mentoring relationship. Stan (2018) argues that clear communication is particularly significant in educational mentorship, as it bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and practical application, enhancing the mentee's ability to implement effective teaching strategies. Reflective practice, central to the work of Schön (1983) and supported by Hattie (2009), is a cornerstone of effective mentorship. Reflective mentors model a growth-oriented approach, encouraging mentees to critically assess their practices and embrace continuous improvement. Hattie (2009) emphasizes that evidence-based reflection enhances teaching effectiveness and directly impacts student outcomes, making it a vital component of mentorship. The reciprocal nature of mentorship, as noted by Hudson (2013) and Clutterbuck (2004), benefits both mentors and mentees. Mentors gain fresh perspectives and refine their own practices, while mentees develop confidence and professional competence. This mutual growth underscores the transformative potential of mentorship, which extends beyond individual relationships to impact the broader educational community.

However, as identified by Johnson and Ridley (2018), challenges such as unclear boundaries, ineffective communication, and limited reflective practice can hinder the effectiveness of mentorship. Addressing these challenges requires intentional planning and a commitment to fostering

a structured, ethical, and reflective mentoring environment. Mentorship is not merely a tool for professional development but a collaborative and transformative process that enriches the teaching profession. By integrating the qualities outlined in the literature, mentorship can contribute to the cultivation of a professional community committed to continuous learning, innovation, and ethical practice, ultimately benefiting educators, students, and society at large.

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