# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF MENTORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCES

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Temvelo Rejoice Matsebula

December 2023

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to the thesis committee, Dr. Lori Caudle, Dr. Samara Akpovo, and Dr. Misawa Mitsunori for their encouragement, support, and guidance throughout the time of the project.

Thank you to all the Early Childhood Educators for trusting me with their stories making this project possible.

## ABSTRACT

The relationship between social and cultural identities and experiences and how we interpret encounters is vital when looking at mentorship. Early childhood education values the combination of classroom education and field experience for pre-service educators. The ability to be a successful mentor relies on one's ability to reflect on their identity, beliefs, practices, values, and skills. This study sought to explore early childhood mentors' views of their social and cultural identities in relation to their experiences with mentorship by engaging with mentors ($n$=4) in an interview and through reflective journaling about their experiences. Interviews and journals were transcribed and inductively coded using an open coding approach. During interview and journaling, mentors reflected on their social and cultural identity and the impact it had on their role as mentors and focused on how they are intentional when building relationships, providing feedback and support to mentees. Results highlighted that mentors viewed their identity in relation to their experiences as mentors as a mechanism that influenced their approach to mentorship in such a way that it made building relationships and communicating approachable and made them value vulnerability and trust. Findings also illustrated how mentors engage in reflective practice as part of their professional development and growth. Mentors' identity reflection and finding ways to form relationships with mentors in consideration of who they are and the influence their identities and experiences they hold might have on a relationship.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Previous research on mentoring relationships has identified a connection between the quality of the mentor–mentee relationship and positive experiences for the mentee (Dreer, 2021; Forsbach-Rothman, 2007; Hudson, 2016). Varying contextual limitations affect the ability for mentor teachers to cultivate those relationships on a long-term basis in the field of early childhood education (ECE). The identity of a mentor tends to be viewed from the perspective of their professional identity, leaving behind other facets of what forms one's identity, such as social and cultural identities and personality traits (Lammert et al., 2020; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Some approaches to mentorship tend to be formulaic and do not consider different identities and approaches, especially when it comes to providing constructive feedback (Mamoon-Al-Bashir et al., 2016; Maslova et al., 2022). This study aims to investigate how mentors' social and cultural identities influence their approaches to relationship-building and feedback strategies. Aspects of mentorship that will be considered include relationship-building approaches, strategies for providing constructive feedback, and the role of a mentor's identity in these approaches and strategies.

**Research Question:**

How do early childhood mentors' social and cultural identities impact their experiences as mentors?

**Terms and use:**

Mentees, interns, students, and pre-service teachers will be used interchangeably. Inservice teacher and mentor will be used interchangeably.

## Theoretical Framework

Two major theoretical frameworks inform the approach used in this study. When it comes to learning, Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning influences the way in-service teachers are viewed in their professional development journey (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 1997). Recognizing that adults have acquired a coherent body of experiences, associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses, and frames of reference that influenced their identities and worldviews is important. On top of that, taking into consideration one's experience and beliefs while incorporating critical reflection is important when transforming one's beliefs moving forward. Transformative learning involves different phases such as having a dilemma, self-examination, and critical assessment of one's assumptions (Bell et al., 2022; Kitchenham, 2008). The idea of emancipatory learning as described by Mezirow (1981) is vital in this work. Allowing in-service teachers to tell their stories as a way to liberation rather than focusing on viewing their work and challenges from a problematic lens promotes and shows value to the process ECE teachers embark on for their professional development journey while at work. We cannot ignore the importance of the affective, emotional, and social factors that influence transformational learning (Mezirow, 2009).

Lastly, this study utilizes the Reflection for Meaning and Action Framework developed by Isik-Ercan and Perkins (2017). Reflective practices in ECE are a central concept in teacher education and practices. Since reflection encourages one to interrogate and critique their practices and beliefs, this study aims to engage in-service teachers in this process when relating to their view of their role as mentors and its impact on their professional development. Isik-Ercan and Perkins' (2017) approach to reflection includes elements of critical reflection on one's multiple identities and voices. This approach considers and creates room for one's race, class,

gender, and other factors to be examined as a means to understand one's proposition. The focus is not on what works best, but on transforming professional dispositions toward inclusion and responsiveness (Isik-Ercan & Perkins, 2017; Leggett & Newman, 2018).

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Mentorship in ECE

Mentorship, at times, is confused with coaching while others might use the terms interchangeably. Though both approaches tend to borrow from each other, they differ. McGill and Brockbank (2012) argued that the purpose of coaching is to change behavior, suggesting that its place lies within managing the performance of staff and ensuring tasks are completed in the 'right' way. In this process, one person is evaluated for the work they produce based on guidelines on how to perform the task. An example of coaching between a preservice teacher working in a classroom would be receiving a review on a lesson that they developed and implemented in a classroom. Knowledge differential and role definition are vital in coaching because the focus is to improve outcomes and job performance.

Mentorship is about creating human bonds (Colley, 2003; Phillips-Jones, 2000). One can look at mentorship from the Vygotskyian (1978) approach where the more knowledgeable partner teaches or models for the inexperienced partner. This definition of mentoring gives a reason why coaching and mentorship can be used interchangeably. However, one major distinction between mentoring and coaching is that mentoring is a process that requires individuals to examine their values, attitudes, and professional ambitions, then set appropriate goals around these to further their professional development. Mentoring is not meant to evaluate the less knowledgeable other based on someone else's set standards for achieving goals. In combination with Duffy-Fagan et al. (2021), Hairon et al. (2020), and McGill and Brockbank's (2012) definitions of mentoring, in the context of this study, mentorship is defined as a reciprocal, collaborative, reflective process that challenges the traditional processes of having the

more experienced (mentor) guiding the less experienced (mentee) while acknowledging the inevitable power differentials in the relationship.

Mentoring can be situated in a career context for the purpose of nurturing novice employees and providing pedagogical support (Reinhardt, 2017). Mentors also support the novice emotionally with interpersonal behaviors that strengthen the mentoring bond and are critical for success in many career fields and early childhood; less focus has been placed on this ideal. Keiler et al. (2020) mentioned that the participants in their study described how challenging it was for them to shift from being a teacher to being a mentor. One cannot ignore the fact that mentorship in early childhood involves being able to switch from being a teacher of children to being a teacher and a mentor of an adult. Clarke et al. (2013) found that mentors regarded the acquisition and improvement of their own skills to be of importance in their role as mentors, which shows how the role of being a mentor is connected to the mentor's view of their own practice. Bell et al. (2022) and Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019) discussed how mentors play a pivotal role in helping mentees in their learning journey and that the need for opportunities to grow in their own practice meets the demands of the role of mentors. Outcomes that are linked to indicators of effective practices may provide clearer directions for both mentors and mentees; the outcomes require training regarding the role of being a mentor to see the results. The training allows the mentor to be able to raise issues and aim to improve their own skills by observing others' practices and offering constructive feedback which creates space for growth for everyone involved (Hairon et al., 2020).

ECE teachers who are also mentors are in a unique position. Though they might have training on early childhood education, some programs do not equip teachers with opportunities to understand how adults learn (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Even when looking at the programs

that are available for ECE educators, a study in Washington State concluded that staff requirements do not allow sufficient time and support for teachers to be able to obtain and demonstrate the depth and breadth of knowledge, skills, and needed dispositions in their classroom (Chu, 2016). In a mentorship role, ECE mentors are not just tasked with the role of providing a space for novice teachers to learn, they also have the responsibility to work with adults who learn differently from the population they serve children.

In such a unique field, research on mentorship has not focused on developing ideas about how ECE teachers differentiate between being a mentor and being a coach. Though we understand that most ECE teachers tend to use the traditional model for mentoring, there is a lack of understanding regarding mentors' choices and preferences (Dreer, 2021; Hairon et al., 2020). The focus has not been on how these relationships benefit in-service teachers to ensure they gain the experience they need to be efficient teachers (Dreer, 2021; Shanks, 2017). When looking at the role of the mentor, most focus has been on the structure of mentorship and providing guidelines to equip them to be able to perform their role (Dreer, 2021; Orland-Barack & Wang, 2021; Squires, 2019). Less emphasis has been placed on the identity of the teacher and their values and experiences and how identity shapes how they viewed and valued their role for themselves and for the mentee. The perspective of the mentor has also been left out of research with the use of stereotypes about early childhood educators that they do the job because they love children (Hagenauer et al., 2021).

**Complexity of Teacher Identity in ECE**

Identity is contextualized as a sense of integration of the self, in which different characteristics come together in a unified whole (Schulte et al., 2018). Sachs (2005) described teachers' identity as a mode where teachers attempt to understand how to be teachers, how to act

as teachers in the classroom, and with parents, teachers attempt to understand their responsibilities and their place in society to fully grasp their teacher identity. This view of teacher identity combines the social and cultural identities teachers need to consider when engaging in reflection.

Social identity, when defined, can include aspects of a person in terms of their group memberships, which are linked to the individual's social roles (Charness & Chen, 2020; Deaux, 1994). These characteristics, in terms of early childhood educators, could include, but are not limited to, gender, parental status, educator, and caregiver. Social identities impact how an individual defines and views themselves in society. The sense of oneself as belonging to a particular category or group of people, or of being characterized by labels, begins early on in life and is influenced by the environment an individual interacts with in their life. One needs to also remember that when individuals feel that they belong to a group, they can derive at least a part of their sense of identity from that group and different parts come from different groups.

Cultural identity can be defined as a combination of self in a group that an individual belongs to with values internalized from the groups with status assigned to belonging to the group (Schwartz et al., 2008). Cultural identity tends to be linked with a specific culture or cultures, such as American or South African. Even the broad term American or South African includes cultures that share or have the same practices, beliefs, interests, and principles of living.

A person's identity influences their values, beliefs, practices, and how they interpret their experiences. Teachers' identities are continuously constructed through the negotiation of different discourses. Scherr and Johnson (2017) mentioned that when teachers look at their professional identity, they classify it as an ongoing, complex, and dynamic process that develops over time. Early childhood teachers' identities tend to be viewed and classified as altruistic and

intrinsic. The goal of meeting the early childhood promise that has been made over the years toward children is viewed as the only motivating factor for teachers not taking into consideration the effort it takes to provide quality care and education for children (Burchinal et al., 2022; Karch, 2013; NAEYC, 2012). The reason why a teacher might be willing to teach in early childhood and assume other roles is more complex than just how they view their professional identity.

Teachers' professional identities are not formed based on their perceptions of themselves, but factors such as their school climate and working conditions tend to influence teachers' perceptions of themselves. Their work as early childhood educators and teaching quality play a role. Gibson (2015) mentioned that most early childhood teachers tend to view their knowledge of children as central to their professional identity and though valid, for teachers who also assume the role of a mentor in early childhood, research needs to expand how that role of a mentor can be incorporated into teachers' viewpoints of their identity. This is not just a task to complete, but it involves being part of an education system bigger than the mentor's classroom. Consider that early childhood teachers who are mentors not only need to continuously construct their view and understanding of child development, but they also participate in a relationship with another teacher or student teachers where they have to share their understandings and be willing to have their understandings challenged. The way professional identity for these teachers is situated is not inclusive of all the major factors involved in the creation and development of the identity (Goldhaber et al., 2020).

Humans have other forms of identities that are vital to how they interact with others. Early childhood teachers' professional identities do not develop without impacting or being impacted by the individual's other identities. It is necessary to recognize the significance of an

individual's visible and invisible identities and how they were shaped by one's held beliefs, and their growing professional identity in order to clearly identify the influence of each individual's identity (Bukor, 2015; Lammert et al., 2020). On top of that, understanding that being an effective teacher does not necessarily equate to being an effective mentor is vital. When looking for and evaluating mentors, one aspect that is focused on is the teacher's professional identity and their teaching abilities creating the idea that effective teachers in the classroom are effective mentors. One area where this belief seems to be evident is in early childhood (Knight, 2017). Being an effective teacher for children does not mean that one is an effective teacher for adult students and studies in this field do not explore this phenomenon and its impact.

**Relationship Building**

Successful mentoring can result in promoting a culture of learning where knowledge gain occurs for both the mentor and the novice teacher. The process of mentoring can occur in a formal or an informal form. The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is important in both approaches (Doan, 2013; Dreer, 2021; Forsbach-Rothman, 2007). The relationship defines the channel of communication and collaboration in and outside the classroom. The interaction style between the dyad exists in a context where power differential, cultures, beliefs and other factors exist, and it is critical for both parties to reflect on their own identities and what they bring to the relationship (Hudson, 2016). The timeline of the relationship formation and goal formation depends on the dyad. A critical element of the mentoring process and educator development is reflection, and mentors play a pivotal role in facilitating it (Doan, 2013; Duffy-Fagan et al., 2021). The approach for facilitating this process differs for each mentor and a reflection from the mentor's perspective is vital considering that the mentor gets to interact with different mentees

over the years and the mentees are also individuals with their own beliefs and values. The differences in approach lead to a lack of uniformity, which results in different experiences.

Relationships can be viewed as effective when unhealthy conflicts do not exist, however, one cannot ignore the impact of those disagreements in a relationship. Docan-Morgan (2011) and Hagenauer et al. (2021) looked into relational turning point events between teachers and their students and found out that those events had a short and long-term impact on relationship development. The way the teachers interpreted those events impacted how they viewed the student and the relationship. Looking into incidents where differences occur can help us understand how those events impact mentorship (Russell & Russell, 2011; Ulla & Larsen, 2021). Krieg et al. (2019) mentioned how most studies, when it comes to teacher mentorship, fall under the criticism of assuming that if more effective mentoring occurs with more effective mentors, the relationship between effective mentorship and mentees' positive experiences would be based solely on the matching of mentees and mentors. This assumption ignores all the other factors involved in a dyadic relationship when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of the relationship such as identities, values, beliefs, and expectations.

Having both mentors and mentees emphasizing that emotional support is a significant task of mentors raises questions relating to the expectations of interpersonal relationships and what it takes for mentors and mentees to build those relationships while making sure that they are still providing high-quality care for children. Early childhood teachers are trained to work with children. Jevtic and Rogulj (2022) mentioned that one of the detrimental assumptions is that since early childhood teachers can work with children, then they can be competent enough to work with adults. Such assumptions create environments where in-service teachers have to be the ones who seek professional development to be able to be effective mentors. To be able to focus

on building a relationship with interns, in-service teachers need to understand the position interns tend to find themselves in when it comes to their roles. Interns, or news teachers, when they are in classrooms working on integrating theory with practice, tend to go through a major identity shift (Sunde & Ulvik, 2014). Self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy can overwhelm an intern. This means that even if a mentor can be intentional and create room for the intern to share their ideas, the interns might minimize their ideas or have a hard time articulating them. This can provide an opportunity for the mentor to work on building a relationship with the intern. Jones (2010) and Sunde and Ulvik (2014) mentioned examples where mentors chose to gently encourage the intern to share and develop their ideas for learning purposes. Taking that approach seemed to positively impact the relationship. This approach can strengthen the relationship between the dyad.

Relationships cannot exist without considering the culture surrounding the individuals and the cultures they each bring. Mentors struggle to navigate multiple complex relationships with administrators, other teachers, parents, and their own mentors in such a way that the other relationships and support systems can impact their relationship with the mentee (Gardiner & Weisling, 2018; Lammert et al., 2020). Differences in cultures bring about challenges, such as different understandings, expectations, and approaches. Different understandings of approaches to mentoring could have an impact both on activities mentors choose to utilize and on the need for mentor education where the focus is not just on practical teaching skills, but also on relationship-building skills (Sunde & Ulvik, 2014). Positively embracing differences in a mentorship can create opportunities for growth for both the mentee and the mentor and dismantle barriers that come with hierarchy in relationships.

**The Role of Communication in Providing Constructive Feedback**

The ability to be a successful mentor relies on one's ability to reflect on their beliefs, practices, values, and skills. Bleach (2020) mentioned some skills that are vital for mentors to have in their toolboxes. These skills range from communication skills such as being an active listener and giving others the space to think. These communication skills are vital when we consider the power dynamics of a mentor-mentee relationship where the mentor's experience and role in the classroom tend to take precedence when not evaluated. Goldhaber et al. (2018) and Goldhaber (2019) talked about how feedback loops can add value when looking at communication, especially when working with in-service teachers. When power dynamics exist, mentorship can create a bridge, however the identity of those involved in that dynamic impacts their influence of mentorship.

Further, trust, empathy, respect, and confidentiality, as mentioned by Bleach (2020), are necessary skills to have for mentors, especially when it comes to the utilization of skills such as noticing the existence or lack of confidence in a mentee. Lack of trust can lead to creating a chasm in the relationship thus affecting communication and collaboration. Jevtic and Rogulj (2022) mentioned that though we value the importance of learning in a real-world context for pre-service teachers, an individualized approach to practice and mentoring with a safe environment for learning is vital. To be able to achieve this form of learning, mentorship which is completely different from supervision is of utmost importance.

On top of that, when looking at communication in a mentorship relationship, one has to not only focus on how information is communicated, but also on what is being communicated, especially in an early childhood classroom. It is important for mentors to reflect even on minor details, such as word choices and timing when it comes to how they communicate. Reflection

regarding the difference in giving instructions and using examples to help mentees understand an approach was viewed as necessary by mentors (Matsumoto-Royo & Ramírez-Montoya, 2021). This can be important, especially when it comes to the goal of preparing pre-service teachers not for their internship classroom experience, but for their practice forward while having in-service teachers gain meaningful experience being mentors influencing their practice.

Mentors could alter the trajectories of a mentee and that can be seen in how they provide feedback. On top of that, feedback is another aspect of mentorship that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of mentoring. Zhukova (2018) claimed that "more targeted and systematic feedback and assistance is required to support teachers' professional growth and development throughout their career" (p. 112). Keiler et al. (2020) mentioned how teachers and their students viewed feedback as important, especially when a mentor is interested in mastering this complex skill for the benefit of both partners. Aspfors and Fransson's (2015) meta-analysis on mentorship shed light when it came to feedback in the sense that due to the way, mentorship tends to be operationalized, different approaches are effective depending on the type of operationalization here being formal or informal relationships.

Constructive feedback will be another focus in this study due to its qualities and benefits. Aspfors and Fransson (2015) reported that constructive feedback in preservice teacher education is a vital ingredient in the mentoring process. Feedback allows for the preservice teacher to reflect and improve on their teaching practice. To be able to provide constructive feedback either as oral or written feedback, the mentor needs to observe the mentee's practices and work on areas of growth. Feedback can be given in different forms, ranging from formative, summative, facilitative or directive; considering that the most important goal for feedback is to help another individual reflect on their practice for their growth and development, constructive feedback,

either active or passive, should aim to be a tool that promotes learning and teaching. Hardavella et al. (2017) emphasized that appropriate feedback is always learner-centered/mentee centered as it is aimed at developing the receivers' competence and confidence at different stages of their professional growth, which applies the same way to a mentee. There is a lack of understanding on how feedback is given a mentorship compared to a coaching relationship.

Henderson et al. (2019) looked at aspects that constructive feedback should address from the perspective of the receiver and those aspects apply to the mentor. Looking at the impact of (1) how mentors understand and value feedback, (2) how mentors provide room for the mentee to be active in the feedback process, and (3) how mentors use evidence to plan and judge the effectiveness of their approaches is important; there is a lack of literature exploring these aspects of feedback from the mentor's perspective, let alone a mentor in an early childhood setting (Henderson et al., 2019; Mamoon-Al-Bashiret al., 2016; Maslova et al., 2022). Maslova et al. (2022) looked at this phenomenon between a student-teacher relationship using a quantitative approach, which was informative on preferred choices of feedback but the reasons behind those preferences were not discussed.

A qualitative approach to understanding how mentors define and provide constructive feedback is vital when it comes to building a foundation for understanding the role of a mentor and their approaches. Taking into consideration the preferred method of feedback for the mentees is important (Lammert et al., 2020; Leggett & Newman, 2018; Masantiah et al., 2020). According to Hudson (2013), "mentoring as an underutilized, cost-effective way to engage teachers in professional development needs to be explored as an option to inject reform measures into an education system" (p. 4), but mentoring must be effective in order to be worth the effort required.

**Connections**

Throughout the literature on mentorship, a positive relationship is viewed and presented as essential for mentees' development of teaching skills, which considers the mentors' personal attributes, such as interpersonal skills, throughout the relationship (Hudson et al., 2016; Orland-Barak, 2021). Personal and professional identity traits can add to forming a successful relationship, which pushes for a re-exploration of how we define and view teacher identity, especially in a mentorship. Teacher identities tend to be viewed mainly from their professional and institutional identity, which leaves out the role of their personal identities. Knowing that teachers' identities are continuously constructed through the negotiation of discourses, the relationships that mentors have with mentees have an impact on their identity while at the same time, their identity and how they define their identity impacts how they mentor (Lammert et al., 2020). Understanding how early childhood teachers view themselves in their role as mentors is vital in understanding their approaches to relationship building and feedback provision.

On top of that, the focus on mentorship, especially in the early childhood education field, is based on how it is supposed to support mentees' well-being and ensure that they flourish (Dreer, 2021; Vesely et al., 2014). The well-being of the mentor tends to not be highlighted, especially when it comes to how they view the relationships they form and the meaning those relationships hold for the mentor. The benefit of those relationships is viewed from the mentees' perspective while there is a lag on our understanding of the principles that support effective mentoring and delivery modes from the mentors' perspective (Hairon et al.,2020; Sewell et al., 2017). The modes include structured-ness, relevance, applicability and workability (Hairon et al., 2020).

One construct that is involved in all the modes is feedback. Feedback delivery can shape how the relationship develops and how the mentee's expectations are met. We cannot take out the beliefs of the mentor when it comes to the mentoring modes when evaluating the effectiveness of mentorship. On top of that, if we view mentorship as a learning experience that is meant to be reciprocal to both mentors and mentees, understanding how these learning experiences (mentorship) are involved in the teacher's identity development is vital (Rojas et al., 2021). Gaining understanding on the value mentors place on the relationships can help us understand how to collaboratively work with the dyad when it comes to approaches that move us towards effective mentorship, which is the main goal of forming these relationships.

# CHAPTER THREE: CURRENT STUDY

This study used an exploratory qualitative inquiry approach to understand how early childhood teachers' social and cultural identities impact their experiences as mentors. Teachers' experiences were explored regarding their approaches to building relationships with mentees and providing constructive feedback. This study aimed to focus on amplifying the real experiences of mentor teachers in an early childhood setting to provide us with insights into their successes and challenges in relation to their identity. The study utilized a qualitative approach to be able to understand how the teachers interpret their experiences, how those interpretations play a role in how they construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to those experiences.

After obtaining approval from the university institutional review board, an email was shared with program directors and the staff members that worked with mentors. The request was for them to forward to mentors a recruitment email about the study and the consent form that contains information about the study. Participants who were interested in participating contacted us through email indicating their interest. Eligibility was confirmed through that email exchange and the interview was scheduled.

## Participants and Context

The participant sample included four early childhood educators from the same university early learning lab school in the southeastern United States. Demographics were collected at the end of the interview. The sample consisted of women who identified as White/ Caucasian whose first language was English. The age ranged from late twenties to mid-forties. Some participants held at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education while some participants had master’s degrees in early childhood education with some having certification in education.

Participants had extensive experiences working with children from different settings such as Head Start, private preschools, and university labs. The participants worked with children ranging from infants to preschool aged children. At the time of the interviews, they all had worked at the early learning center for at least more than a year as demonstration teachers and one also served as an assistant director of curriculum and instruction and demonstration teacher. Regarding mentorships, all participants mentioned how though they had not received formal training, they had worked with a mentor/professional development coach for a while, and they have continuously engaged in departmental meetings for all the mentors to discuss challenges, approaches, and achievements as they engage with mentees. Those meetings were viewed as influential in their mentorship identity development.

Lastly the university early learning lab school is a unique place compared to other early learning settings. The lab school follows an emergent curriculum with practices and principles that are central to the Reggio Emilia approach and is an affiliate of the university's Child and Family studies department that focuses on training efficient teachers through a child development in context approach. Most mentees at this location are students completing their training as early childhood educators who tend to be young and new to the field, and their demographics are representative of the city and the university student population.

**Procedure/Measures**

This study aimed to understand the role of early childhood educators' social and cultural identities influence on their experiences as mentors. As an exploratory study, the aim was to gain detailed experiences in their particular context to understand teachers' perceptions and the challenges they faced, while recognizing the lack of mentor voices in mentoring literature. An exploratory qualitative research approach is viewed as the best

approach for this study because it enabled not just the assessment of mentors' experiences through the use of a standardized instrument (Hunter et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2018). The documentation, reflection, and analysis of current or past interactions with mentees for in-service mentor teachers was employed for each part of the study.

Data were collected using two approaches based on how the mentors' social and cultural identities impacted their experiences as mentors. The two approaches used to collect data included an extensive interview and journal entry. Once participants have been recruited and eligibility confirmed, the first step involved scheduling the interview that focused on exploring questions regarding identity, mentorship, relationship building, and feedback strategies.

Identity reflection was the first part of the interview, which included exploring one's social and cultural identity in relation to mentorship and its impact on the relationships one builds with mentees. Examples of questions used included: *Can you tell me about who you are, including social identities that are most salient or important to you? These identities can include but are not limited to your gender, race, occupation, age, and social class/socioeconomic status. Describe the process you think your identities influence the work you do as a mentor? Now, think of instances where you think your identity was viewed/perceived by you or others based on your ability to mentor preservice students and share what happened.*

The second part of the research question involved mentorship experiences for mentors in relation to their identity. Taking into consideration that mentorship is a multifaceted process, the focus was on aspects of mentorship such as relationship building, feedback, and communication in relation to their identities. Relationship building included identifying new knowledge, skills,

and dispositions when it came to developing and maintaining a relationship with a mentee in order to rationalize changes that one employed in their approach to relationship building.

Communication and constructive feedback were also investigated through reflection, and analysis of communication method(s) that mentors used when interacting with mentees and any modifications they applied. Reflecting on those choices and the results and on how their identities might have influenced their choices was pursued during the interview. To understand communication strategies, questions used included the following: *how do you usually provide feedback? What are some things that you are mindful of when providing feedback: What are your dos and don'ts when providing feedback as a mentor? Please tell us about some barriers you have faced when trying to provide effective feedback to a mentee? Thinking back to some of your salient identities and experiences, how do you think they influence your approach when providing feedback?*

Once the interview was completed, the following task involved mentors completing a reflective journal entry. The journal prompt was emailed to participants within a few days of completing the interview. Participants had the freedom to either type, handwrite, or share a voice recording of their responses. Considering that individuals have different approaches when it comes to how they choose to process and respond to a reflective question, having different mediums to use allows each participant to have a choice in terms of how they prefer to share their responses. This completed the data collection process. Interviews were audio recorded and then independently transcribed and journals were deidentified once received to match the interview transcripts.

## Data Analysis

Data gathered were organized and de-identified. Participants were given pseudonyms and journals and interviews were transcribed. An inductive analysis was utilized to analyze the data collected through this study. Incident-by-incident coding was used to code the data that describe the same meaning unit (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The codes were then clustered to develop themes that are grounded in the data from different participants. The goal was to avoid using pre-existing categories or preconceived ideas to drive data analysis as a way to create codes and themes based on the collected data. Steps on how to engage in this form of data analysis were based on Kostere and Kostere (2021).

The first step was to read through the data to become familiar with the data of one interview. Intuitive phrases and paragraphs that seem meaningful were highlighted. The highlighted data was noted and a phrase that represented that unit was written next to it. The phrases were then classified as meaning units which were clustered based on their connections or relations to others that lead to identifying patterns. Kostere and Kostere (2021) mentioned that the patterns should answer questions such as what is happening in the data. The patterns were then clustered to form themes using a data display that captured important information from the data. Once coding of all datasets was completed, the patterns were listed under each theme they represented or explained. Dominant codes were the main focus when it came to developing themes (see Table 1 for reference).

## Trustworthiness

Data triangulation occurred through two approaches. The first approach involved using different data collection measures from participants. Using an interview and a reflective journal entry allowed the data collected on social and cultural identities and mentorship experiences to reflect initial thoughts and reflective thoughts of participants. The goal was to recruit participants

from two centers to support trustworthiness of the data obtained, but this was not successful. Considering that early childhood educators in the private sector might have different experiences compared to those in the public sector is important when attempting to understand mentors' experiences. Member checking occurred during data collection. The interviewer used probing questions to expand participants' responses in order to not make assumptions about participants' responses.

**Positionality Statement**

As an early childhood educator who values the role of mentorship, this study is influenced by my beliefs and experiences when it comes to work, which I have previously engaged in. As a black woman, I aim to always engage in reflection regarding my social and cultural identity and how it influences my work or how others perceive my identity. I identify as a critical constructivist. I value engaging in critical work where we reflect on the work we do and its contribution to social justice. I also value the co-creation of truths between the researcher and partners. Who I am and the work I do influences what participants share and my identity can influence how I understand or perceive other people's truths and experiences. As a qualitative researcher, I value the authentic representation of participants' experiences in research to inform and guide the work that researchers and educators engage in. Who I am has influenced the research design and data analysis approaches while being grounded and guided by previous research.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand how mentors' social and cultural identities impact their experiences as mentors. This exploratory study included four participants from an early learning university lab. All through exploratory analysis, the themes that emerged from the participants' interviews and journal entries, included: 1) Identity Composition; 2) Authentic Empowerment in Practice; 3) Positive Vulnerability.

## Identity Composition

Identity is multifaceted and is ever changing due to life experiences and other factors. This theme included how participants described their identities from social and cultural perspectives, and how those identities are expressed. Further, examples of how those identities influence their professional identity as mentors are discussed.

### *Zama's Story*

Zama is a twenty-nine-year-old woman who identifies as White/Caucasian and a Christian. Zama holds a master's degree. She has two dogs and has the privilege of owning a house. She was born and raised in this city and attended university close to home where she was in a sorority and engaged in extracurricular activities throughout college. She shared that, "Zama loves to read. I read a lot of books. My goal is 45 this year, and like in a social setting, I can be an extrovert. I can be really animated; I can connect with people really easily. Empathy is both my strength and my weakness." She shared that she also loves recharging at home. She grew up in a suburb and her family was high middle class to upper middle class. This allowed her to attend charter schools where she enjoyed project-based learning and small classrooms.

Looking at racial diversity of her schools and neighborhoods Zama shared, "it would be predominantly white with some other races and ethnicities and all of that sprinkled in." She

shared that she values and holds her workplace's view of actively seeking out diverse populations. She contrasted how her parents were able to survive on her dad's income which led to her mother not working a lot while since her and her partner have service jobs, they both work and she takes pride in her work.

Zama believes that authenticity and being true to yourself and others is valuable, especially in the workplace. She has worked with infants, young toddlers and pre-k children. She values the experience she has gained in working with children and makes it her goal to show how rewarding it can be to work with this age group. She has attended multiple action research seminars about mentorship and has been a mentee herself where she received leadership training and pedagogical support. She has attended a conference that she viewed instrumental in her journey as a mentor and a teacher.

***Daya's Story***

Daya views herself as a veteran at her workplace where she has worked for almost two decades. Daya is forty-three and has worked with young children in different capacities between six weeks through kindergarten and holds a bachelor's degree. She enjoys spending time with her husband. When asked about her identity, she said how due to tragic events that affected her family over the past three years, her identity and her approach to life and values have been changing. Daya after sharing with me the major life changing events that took place, she concluded with, "I feel like that in itself is, you know, started to define me and change my identity in some ways. I am a Christian. I like to spend time with my friends, my family and just, you know, live in the moments that we have together." She finds joy in helping others and engages in a process where she takes time to know herself in those moments.

Her environment changed a lot as she went through school and the community she grew up in terms of diversity. She said, “I clearly remember not being in school with anyone other than White children until I went to middle school, it was 6th grade.” Both her parents and grandparents worked, and she shared how because her family was middle class and she was attending a school that served mainly upper-class White children, she never felt like she belonged in that school. The school was also not representative of the community where she was bussed from and when she went to middle school, that was her first time attending a school that served the community where she lived. That experience shaped how she viewed diversity as more than just racial and that assumptions about someone’s cultural identity based on racial or identity can be misleading and limiting.

***Simmy’s Story***

Simmy discussed her identity as, “I am passionate about teaching, that's probably my biggest identity as a person besides being a friend and a daughter.” She is forty-seven and she talked about how she has been an educator for almost two decades. She has worked in Head Start for most of those years and in preschool. She shared how she is a quiet person and does not enjoy being the center of attention. Simmy’s private life is separate from her work life. Though she loves working with children, she does not want children of her own.

Simmy shared how she grew up in a Southern city that had a high population of White/Caucasian identifying people just like her and her family. Though it was mainly a farming area, she grew up in a city. She shared how she grew up feeling safe and was able to roam about the neighborhood. She grew up not very religious but when she moved to where she lives now, she went through culture shock because everyone around her was highly religious, and it was a big part of their identity. Talking about diversity in her school, she shared, “in my graduating

class of 300, I would say, culturally, there may be 5 kids that weren't White, and that was my whole life through high school." She experienced a shift in college and when she later returned to school, she talked about how the age difference between her, and her classmate was another challenge she had to navigate.

Simmy always has high expectations of herself and looks at her mistakes as opportunities to learn. Simmy shared that she grew up middle class and teaching opened her eyes. She worked with families that struggled financially and that changed the ways she viewed children and the impact their environment can have on their development.

### *Amo's Story*

Amo is a White/Caucasian thirty-three-year-old woman who has been a teacher for a decade. She has two children of her own and lives with her husband and dog. She enjoys being with her family and dancing. She also enjoys social activities and classics. She enjoys working in academia and being involved in research.

Amo grew up in a progressive area and later moved to a rural evangelical area. Transitioning from living in a city where her and her family enjoyed a bustling life, rural life was a challenge to adjust into as a child. She talked about the change in education she was receiving. An example she provided was, "I remember the math class that I went to in my 6th grade year was working on things that I had done in 4th grade in my previous school, so I felt like I was losing a lot of academic challenges by being there." Now she views this as one of the major influences on how she interacts with her mentees. She shared that she understands that we all have different educational experiences thus having different needs.

Most of her workplaces had been diverse when looking at cultural aspects and that has challenged her to be intentional when working with children, parents, and others. She also has

transitioned from early learning centers that had funding challenges to ones that were financially doing well. She talked about how those experiences shaped how she viewed education and learning in relation to available resources. Amo shared how she wants mentees to be able to be reflective and intentional.

## Authentic Empowerment in Practice

Authenticity involves taking an individual's values, beliefs and their identity and aligning those to their approach to doing things. This means that an individual who includes authenticity in their work engages in reflection of their identity and actions to find an approach that is intentional and effective. On the other hand, empowerment involves truly believing in another individual and, when necessary, providing them with opportunities to learn and have authority while respecting their approach and pace. To empower others in an authentic way, mentors reflect on their identities, not just in the classroom, but in society, and find ways to support mentees in their journey of social and professional identity growth. This section expands how mentors in this study positioned themselves in their practice as thriving to be authentic and empowered to empower mentees. Evidence of authenticity is seen in how they viewed and built relationships, supported mentors in their identity development, and acted as cheerleaders.

### *Mentee Identity Development*

When working with individuals with more experience, at times one can default in mimicking how that individual does things. During the interviews, when asked about their goals when engaging in mentorships, participants pointed out how their goal is to make sure mentees have the opportunity to explore their beliefs about working with children while promoting not just pedagogical growth, but the ability for mentees to set their own goals. Zama mentioned that the reason she loved being a mentor was her love for “learning and curiosity.” Amo also said,

“I've kind of like grown into my voice and I don't want students who are more introverted or who have a calmer demeanor to feel like they have to do what I do all day”. Other participants also talked about how they had amazing experiences working with mentors of their own and mentoring others such that when engaging as mentors, they are not trying to have replicas of themselves or of their approaches. “Help (mentees) identify who they are as a teacher and to find their voice,” Amo shared. This approach in mentorship highlights how mentors viewed it as necessary to promote mentee identity discovery through having the expectation that each individual has to be reflective of their approach in order to develop their own approach.

Mentors also engage in empowerment through their view and expression of respect for children, teachers, experiences, processes and roles. The goal of early childhood education is to serve children from diverse backgrounds, respecting their experiences and believing that each child is capable of learning and achieving positive results. Mentors that were interviewed shared how their goal was to make sure that they model for mentees that they respect children and the work they do. Amo shared how for her she took her responsibilities seriously and recognized that she had responsibilities to those around her. She took pride in being a compassionate mentor and coworker. Simmy said, “In my classroom, I always, always talk about school family. Like I said, families are tough right? And but we're in it together,” when asked about her classroom management and engagement approach. Respect for others, especially in a family-like setting, makes navigating challenges possible. Working to make sure that mentees feel seen and accepted as Amo discussed requires respecting what they bring to the classroom. Working in an environment where you are respected can be empowering because your contributions are not undervalued or ignored.

Empowering mentees through their identity development also meant engaging in topics that challenged societal views of the identities that mentees and the mentors in this study held in relation to expectations society held towards how they had to act. One interesting story that related to how mentors supported a mentee in this identity growth through being authentic as while navigating empowerment was told by Amo. She shared a story about how one of her students was very sensitive to feedback and took it personally. When she attempted to tell the student that she respected her agency, and that she did not have to ask or report when she was going to the bathroom and that interaction did not go as Amo had imagined. Considering the challenges in ECE and education of teachers getting UTIs and not having time to go to the bathroom and the culture that women should ask for permission as if they are not capable of making decisions for themselves, Amo tried to provide feedback to the student and when she did, the student cried. She shared that her response was, “I hope that's like a cathartic cry and not like I think you're doing a bad job. I'm just trying to empower you.” She also shared that, “A woman in this society, we're often told that we need to ask permission to be ourselves, and we need to ask permission to have needs”.

***Being a Cheerleader to Empower***

When asked about how others in society viewed early childhood and how the field was situated in terms of development and education, mentors discussed how others did not consider the field as a profession. Daya shared, “I think we are still very much in a spot where people view early childhood education as babysitting. You are babysitting young children. You can't teach young children like, what do you mean you're a teacher? You're not a teacher, you're a babysitter.” This view can be discouraging for those who spent time learning about child development and the importance of that stage in children’s development. When asked about her

approach to working with mentees, Amo said, “I would take the role of like emotional or like a supportive coach like that, cheerleader, like you can do it. You are capable of doing these things and they're hard, but you're doing it.” Simmy shared the same sentiments when she shared, “you really need somebody to be a cheerleader.” To be a cheerleader for Amo, it involved helping mentees find out what they want the most support with or finding things that are going to be supportive to them as they move forward on their journey in the field.

Mentors empowered mentees by being supportive while providing feedback. Amo shared, “I've had several students who have expected me to be some kind of like, drill sergeant manager and like, OK, today we're checking this off and then we're checking this off and did you do this because we're checking this off and like that is not at all my management type style…I try to be direct.” Daya also reiterated by sharing, “I try really hard not to be accusatory.” Amo and Daya’s sentiments demonstrate how providing feedback in such a way that those receiving it feel like they can challenge or contribute to the feedback is important when empowering others. Feedback not only communicates what needs to be reevaluated, but it helps mentees see how the mentors view them and the work they do in the classroom.

In this study, a mentor’s stance as a cheerleader is honest and a balance between the types of feedback provided is necessary. At times, the focus can be on changing behaviors or challenging individuals to be reflective of their methodology when working with children, and that can challenge the stereotypical view of a cheerleader who aims to empower. This is where being authentic comes into play because it means that the mentors need to not just be positive but be critical in sharing feedback. Daya shared a refreshing message saying, “I think you know always giving them positive and negative at the same time, letting them know things that they're doing right as well as things that they can work on, but then inviting them into the conversation

of, hey, I'm noticing that." Compliments and highlighting positive things an individual is doing shows that as a mentor your goal is to support them rather than judge them and define them by their areas of growth.

***Connection to Identity***

Authentic empowerment as a positionality that mentors took is based on held identities. Reflecting on her identity and how she respects mentees, Simmy shared, "I guess I look at it from the perspective of I have been mentored, I've been an assistant, I've been a teacher, I've been a student, and what would I want out of this experience. I would want someone to give their best. I would want to have conversations about philosophies and thinking. I would want to hear the why behind things that people do and say." Noting her strive for authenticity, Zama shared, "I value being able to be yourself and being whoever, you are bringing to the table. But in the work context, I am very motivated to be a lifelong learner, and so I still have the hat that I really like and to take in observational, continuing education and research, and all of those things." Being a life-long learner and being able to bring out your true self in interactions indicate that Zama spent time developing her identity and she wants the same for her mentors because she values being able to do so for herself. Throughout the different positions that she has held, she developed her identity as an educator and a mentor. Every experience shaped who she is today and that empowered her to be the mentor she is today thus empowering mentors to develop their identity is significant to them.

Supporting others through empowerment is also embedded in mentors' identities and it can be seen when mentors reflect on their experiences having cheerleaders in their journey. Simmy shared a story about a group where she worked with other educators and her mentor where they engaged in reflection and provided feedback to each other regarding their practices,

and it illustrated how mentors took their experiences that informed their identities and applied them as they cheer and empower mentees. Simmy summarized, “So I really loved that idea of being a critical friend. I'm supportive of you as your peer but there are some things that I'm wondering, you know, how can you keep growing and how can I continue to support you in your strengths.” Daya's approach to empowering others connects to her identity as she shared, “I feel like the experiences that I have gained through being a teacher have, you know, given me the background and the knowledge to be able to support all of the people that I interact with in different ways.” Daya has experiences relating to her identity that challenged how she viewed diversity and learning from an early age.

Empowerment was valuable to the participants because they shared identities with most of the mentees and positioned themselves and their experiences from a reflective stance. Zama shared, “it certainly is a privilege to be in my position. I realize that much of my identity also operates from a position of privilege. However, many of my identities line up with those of the student teachers who walk through our door.” Participants of this study were all White/Caucasian women in early childhood education. Early childhood has been a field that is viewed as not professional, and mentors deviated to how their identities are viewed and that prompted identity development and support to be viewed as a mechanism to empower mentees.

**Positive Vulnerability**

Participants in this study shared how they always aim to provide support, comfort, trust and being vulnerable when engaging in mentorship. Zama shared that, for her, one of the main expectations that she holds herself and shares with mentees is that it is okay to make mistakes because from those mistakes one can learn and grow. When asked about how she chooses to communicate those expectations, Zama mentioned that early on, she makes it clear that she will

do things differently and that at times her suggestions might feel odd, but she will always be there to provide more information. She shared that she always tells a mentee that, “You do not have to do everything exactly like I do. The point of this experience is to help you learn more and find your own voice as a teacher.” Communicating the expectation that one needs to be themselves involves vulnerability because one is admitting that they are not the only best but there are others who have knowledge and expertise to offer.

### *Respectful Relationships*

Relationships can be intricate, and participants shared how being direct and valuing friendship and trust was necessary in their mentorship. Despite participants having their own individualized approaches, they had a common approach which was using guided questions to get to know mentees and explore topics such as personalities, and ways each mentee preferred to be given feedback. This seemed like an organizational expectation for all mentors to engage in and use as a tool to start building relationships. During the interviews, I asked mentors to reflect on their view of their responsibilities and how they have grown in terms of how they view their approaches as mentors.

Mentorship is about creating human bonds and to be able to do that, vulnerability was discussed as one approach to create those bonds. Participants shared how they aim to see mentees and humans with experiences, view themselves as learners, which leads to having room for growth. Examples of vulnerability include relinquishing power dynamics that can be assumed in such a relationship.  Simmy said, “I’m not the only person that is the giver of knowledge, so I hope that that she was able to see that there are many ways to do things” That form of vulnerability indicated that Simmy viewed her knowledge and experience as a snippet of the knowledge that exist about early childhood education and professionalism. She did mention at

the beginning of the interview that she viewed herself as a lifelong learner. As a mentor, she acknowledges that there are things she does not know and that is not a weakness but a lesson that the mentee should be aiming to grow their tool kit through working with her and not expecting to have a complete tool kit at the end.

Zama discussed how to form that connection; one needs to be vulnerable. This then impacts how the relationship develops. When working with mentees Zama said, “vulnerability is a big one. I think they have to know that I am not there just to criticize them, that I'm here for us to continue to grow together and I want to see them succeed. So sometimes that means like taking myself down a notch in front of them.” Making it clear that as a team their goal is for both to grow together can be reassuring, especially when receiving feedback or encountering conflict. Participants mentioned how for them building relationships meant vulnerability and trust. When reflecting on how one relationship developed over time Simmy shared, “They were surprised that I trusted them enough to do that.” For Simmy, as the relationship grew, she made it a goal to relinquish power and let mentees have more responsibilities in the classroom. Zama shared that vulnerability, authenticity and valuing connection, contributing to having most of her relationships with mentees be successful. For Zama, this also connects to her value of deep conversations.

When reflecting on relationship building, Daya shared how there are a lot of approaches that can be used but for her, “really inviting them to the conversation and helping them to, like, look at their practice and figure out what could happen differently” was more impactful. Zama shared how for her, her first approach is to be a problem solver but being a mentor for a while has taught her that it is better to focus on what works for each mentor and being willing to change and adapt to that approach. Simmy summed up their reflection by sharing that, “what

works for one person, it doesn't work for everyone and so then it is also the strategy of trying something and being reflective and thinking was that the most supportive, let's see what happens next and then I can adjust what I'm doing to meet."

***Creating Safe Spaces and Equitable Leadership***

Daya shared that for her, she pays attention to small details such as making sure that the mentees have a place for their belongings in the classroom to make sure that they feel welcomed. Building relationships was also connected to how feedback was provided. Daya shared that "being able to listen, being authentic and vulnerable and you know, really trying to get to know each other is a huge part for me because it really does impact how I'm going to give you feedback."

Mentors also viewed mentorship as a space where they are also able to grow and could figure things out as they engage with mentors and be vulnerable about their identity and knowledge to mentees which in turn is an approach where mentors' positionality based on their identity is expressed. Daya shared that," I don't ever like to come in with the attitude that I know everything…, but at the same time. I don't want to come in telling you that I don't, you know, portraying that I don't know anything, because if I don't have any knowledge to share with you then we may not have any points of, you know, conversation for growth and things like that." This exemplified the view of power dynamics in the relationship while highlighting the idea that the expectation is that both individuals will grow as they work together. Mentors are able to evaluate their position and put themselves in a vulnerable position though not minimizing their contribution to the relationship.

Just as when mentors position themselves as authentic when they provide feedback, there is a level of vulnerability involved in providing feedback. Daya shared that "being able to listen,

being authentic and vulnerable and you know, really trying to get to know each other is a huge part for me because it really does impact how I'm going to give you feedback." Zama also shared, "If I am trying to give anyone else feedback, I'm quick to also point out that I have learned that feedback or even I still do this thing, and that hey, I want you to think about this thing." Feedback is not always provided as a rule to be followed or an expectation for change but an invitation to a conversation. These conversations challenge both the mentor and mentee to be critical of factors that influenced how they interpreted an encounter. Amo shared how for her, "The amount of feedback that I give, I really try to tailor to like how much rapport do we have, how much relationship capital is there." She takes the time to reflect on how much she has invested in the relationship and takes a practical approach. This means she has to be honest and turn the feedback into a lesson for herself on what she needs to do regarding relationship building to be able to provide advanced feedback to mentees.

Considering that mentorship is about creating human bonds, setting boundaries can be challenging. When asked about how she communicates her boundaries, Simmy shared that she prefers to be clear and shares that since she cannot assume what others think or value, she prefers that they tell her, and she does the same. Daya shared that for her the balance between being a mentor and being a friend involves a lot of groundwork and setting clear expectations. Zama shared how she makes it clear what her role as a mentor entail to the mentee while not ignoring the fact that at times external factors can impact one's involvement and engagement at work. Being able to set clear boundaries and take time to engage mentees in that process means being open and ready to at times share more than is expected, and Zama shared how lowering yourself which involves being vulnerable is more effective.

Leadership involves a level of vulnerability especially when leadership is not hierarchical. Leaders create an environment where everyone feels safe and heard. Simmy shared, “I’m sitting with the student and they're asking me, you know, questions about why I'm doing what I'm doing, maybe I would be willing to rethink that. Try something different or let them try something different and support them along the way”. Zama shared, “I have expertise. Not the expert.” This humble approach can invite different opinions especially when a mentee feels like they might lack experience and cannot question the mentor.

A leader is a learner too in such a way that they are open to have their views and convictions challenged while being open to explore other ways of doing things. Simmy shared how when mentoring a mentee, she did not assume that her initial modeling of classroom management and teaching children was the only way. She shared how when her approach was not working even when she changed the language she was using and her approach, “then I tried new strategies, I modeled it…, and then we went into a colleague’s classroom and we sat together, and I did kind of some commentary in the ear about what we were seeing.” Simmy was willing to explore other ways and seek assistance from other teachers to be able to provide the mentee with different experiences.

In creating safe spaces, one needs to be able to admit when they make mistakes and Zama summarized this well when she shared how she approached a situation where a mentee kept doing something that was inappropriate in the classroom. “I think the first step is that I try to model. Like the level of professionalism or friendliness or trying to put my phone away because that's expected of them.” shared Zama. modeling the behavior promotes and sets clear expectations in a mentorship whereby when a behavior is being addressed, the mentee does not feel attacked.

### *Connection to Identity*

Vulnerability as a positionality is also related to mentors' identities because when asked to reflect on their identities and roles, Zama for instance talked about how she needs support and that she also has areas to work on as a mentor. This approach is based on her experience and communication choices where sharing her weaknesses and areas of growth with mentees is part of her approach. Zama talked about how for her, she works on creating opportunities for mentees in her classroom where they can see her model and share her practice with them while being willing to receive feedback. Valuing being a learner and being open to engage in a relationship whereas Zama shared, reciprocal shapes mentorship to be more than providing safe spaces for mentees but mentors also get to benefit from learning in those spaces.

Having a humble mentality when approaching mentorship was seen in different conversations. Simmy and Daya talked about being intentional and recognizing that there is no one approach when working with mentees indicated how they valued having different approaches in their toolbox. Amo and Simmy talked about their experiences with mentors in the past and this connected to their approach to take responsibility for their approaches and acknowledge limitations while looking for ways to improve their practices.

Vulnerability was an important positionality for mentors because mentors recognized the impact they have on mentees. Amo said, “I've had several students who have expected me to be some kind of like drill sergeant…., that is not my communication style” and Simmy commented, “they were surprised that I trusted them enough to do that.” These two sentiments indicate assumptions based on prior knowledge and stereotypes of mentors and education that teachers will have less experience might have towards mentors. Choosing to be vulnerable is an approach that allows mentors to show through actions that their goal is not to tell mentees what they can or

cannot do and how to do it but to engage in conversations grounded on strong foundations and trust.

**Mentors' Positionality**

The positions that mentors took when it comes to how they engaged in mentorship were informed by their identity. Mentors' positionality was influenced by their social and cultural identities, and they positioned themselves in such a way that they could be authentic while empowering mentees and vulnerable as necessary and influential in their mentorship process and experiences. How this positionality was informed relates to mentors' backgrounds and prior experiences and led them to find ways to be inclusive and respectful of mentees' identities and experiences. When asked to reflect on how their cultural and social identities influenced their views, they mentioned that they know the work they do is heavily influenced by the teachers they had, the schools they attended, their family financial status, and the communities they grew up in and serve today. Regarding how she thought about her views and values of relationships Zama said, "Family and friends are really important to me. Just connecting is really important to me. This kind of contributes to my mentorship. I don't like small talk. I like deep connections and meaningful conversation." Growing up with a family that valued and promoted and thrived to maintain healthy relationships, Zama explained how she always wants to know her mentees and wants them to know her because without that bond, for her it can be challenging to personalize her feedback or to forge a healthy relationship with a mentee.

Daya talked about how attending an elementary school that had students who shared some of her social identities but were from a higher social class was instrumental to her identity development. She shared that later, she switched to a school where students might have held racial identities that were different from hers but represented the people she saw at the

playground and at the store and combined with her first experience she approached mentorship differently today. When discussing her experience and how it shaped her, she said, "..., just because somebody looks like you doesn't mean that they believe the same way that you do…, just because somebody looks the same or different than you do that that doesn't mean that you're necessarily the same people or different people even." Daya mentioned how due to tragic life events that she has experienced since the beginning of the pandemic, who she is has changed drastically indicating how changes in her identity due to life events, influenced how she engages with others even at the workplace. Mentors' identity influences their experiences in mentorship through the positionalities they took as they engaged in mentorship. This positionalities in relation to experiences and identities are expanded below.

# CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Research shows that mentorship, though at times is confused with coaching, understanding mentors' view and definition of mentorship is important because it helps us understand mentorship as a process of learning (McGill & Brockbank, 2012). This study aimed to answer the question related to how mentors' social and cultural identities influenced their experiences and approaches to mentorship. Using an extensive interview and a reflective journal, mentors shared about who they are and their experiences mentoring. This study and the findings supported that mentors viewed their experiences and identities influential on their approaches when engaging with mentees through valuing vulnerability and empowering approaches.

Such as in Sachs (2005), mentors reflected on their identities to understand who they are and how to conduct themselves while recognizing the need to be flexible. Participants were able to share their experiences from childhood and draw a connection between their choices and approaches regarding mentorship. They saw value in their social identity, especially when working with mentees that did not share the same social identities with them. Mentors recognized the benefits of having shared identities with mentees especially when building relationships and providing feedback.

While all four mentors shared the identity of being White/Caucasian women who owned a home and identified as middle class, they also discussed how growing up either in less diverse areas was something that shaped who they were especially when they transitioned between those places and diverse places. Mentors were able to be critical on how the population they served and the opportunities they had at their current workplace does not represent early childhood centers in the area and they always made it their goal to not mentor without highlighting that this

is not representative of all children and all experiences but was a space to practice skills that related to respecting children and viewing them as capable and interested in learning individuals.

Doan (2013) and Dreer (2021) discussed how relationship building was the cornerstone and defined the communication and collaboration that mentors and mentees use for successful relationships. Participants in this study supported that sentiment from the studies. They shared how, at times, they might want to provide specific feedback, but they always have time to reflect on the relationship they have with the mentee to find effective ways to provide that feedback. In the context of this study, participants referred to building relationships as the first thing that they invest in because it also promotes learning and openness. Participants' expression of relationship building focused on their contribution. They did not expect participants to have blind trust in them but shared that they chose to be vulnerable first modeling for mentees that they were interested in building a mutually beneficial relationship even if it has varying levels of benefit to both.

The connection between relationship building and providing feedback in relation to mentor identity emerged as valuable in this study and participants showed that from their experiences of who they were and the groups they belonged to, vulnerability and empowering mentees were the connecting factors. Jevtic and Rogulj (2022) mentioned that one of the detrimental assumptions is that since early childhood teachers can work with children, then they can be competent enough to work with adults. Though some skills were transferable between the roles to where when asked about their professional identity, participants heavily linked their identity as mentors on their identities as teachers, one participant was clear that though there is fluidity in the two roles, recognizing that she mentors professionals is important to avoid a top-

down approach of communication. The level of vulnerability involved when working with parents or children is different from that involved in mentorship.

Vulnerability can be viewed as being open and recognizant that you can get hurt but the way participants viewed and discussed vulnerability was unique. Participants viewed vulnerability and being able to be vulnerable as a strength and a path to produce positive results. This idea, especially in a professional setting, brings questions to the influence of identity. Since most participants were White/Caucasian women who were raised by both their parents, at times had grandparents around them and attended schools where they were part of the majority especially regarding visible identities, the question stands on how their identities influenced their view of vulnerability. Differences in cultures bring about challenges, such as different understandings, expectations, and approaches thus further highlighting the influence of their identity to the way they viewed being vulnerable and open (Gardiner & Weisling, 2018; Lammert et al., 2020).

Matsumoto-Royo and Ramírez-Montoya (2021) discussed that reflecting on one's approach when providing feedback is necessary because at times the approach tends to have a huge impact than the feedback being provided. When asked about their feedback approaches, participants were able to reflect on how even if their approach led to positive results, they thought of other approaches that could have been effective. Just as in Keiler et al. (2020), mentors were invested in their growth and being able to acquire complex skills when working with mentees and they vocalized that which made it clear on what each individual was working on and bringing into the relationship. Participants were recognizant that their preferred approaches at times were not as effective and that over time, as the relationship developed, they had to adjust their approaches. This supports the idea that mentorships are a valuable tool in

teacher training and education because the mentors understand that they play a vital role in preparing teachers not just to function in that classroom but beyond the program. This relates to the mentors' experiences either when they were students or from the mentorship they received. This level of reflection would not have been possible without the teacher making it a goal to engage in continuous reflection as they work with different mentees.

Further, the setting that the mentors work in impacts their level of engagement. The university lab is associated with the Child and Family studies at the time and that relationship complements each other. Mentors work closely with the educators and the mentees which have set clear expectations. The center also provides mentors with their own mentors and provides spaces for group meetings to discuss and brainstorm together, which is beneficial for mentors. Recognizing that this is a unique environment, it was seen when mentors talked about their experiences. Just as Hairon et al. (2020) discussed, this support offers multiple opportunities for reflection and growth which might not be representative of the field.

In conclusion, the findings of this section correlated with how previous research positioned mentorship in early childhood education and how the approaches used impacted the experiences of mentors and mentees. This study highlighted that the identity of mentors in relation to their experiences and approaches to mentorship influenced their approaches and experiences during mentorship through mentors viewing vulnerability and empowerment as necessary in mentorship. Mentors did not view providing feedback as important, but viewed being authentic, empowering and vulnerable as they provided feedback more influential on one’s experience. This is the same with relationship building. Mentors reflected on their relationships with others in society and their identity and eluded that the first step for building relationships for them involved being authentic and vulnerable while recognizing the identities they share or not

share with mentees. This leads to the conclusion that mentors' social and cultural identities reflection and recognition is vital when exploring mentorship.

**Limitations**

An overarching limitation of this study was the homogeneity of the participants. All participants are White, female, and were recruited from one early learning center. Since this study was conducted with mentors that work at a lab-based preschool that serve students not from low-income families, I can assume that results would differ if a similar study were conducted with mentors who worked in low incomes serving schools. On top of that, potential participants were based on those who had at least three years serving as mentors and were available for interviews during the summer. This sample was not representative of mentors in most early childhood education settings and the lack of diversity, especially regarding the school where they teach, which is not representative of most early learning centers in the area and the population they serve.

Further, another limitation is having a smaller sample size where data collection was not extensive. Since only one interview and one journal entry were completed, it was a challenge to expand some topics that participants might have alluded to during the interview. If a follow up interview was part of the data collection, this would have allowed for themes to be explored further than we were able with one interview. Also having participants from one early learning center did not provide a diverse portfolio of experiences. Future research should examine this understanding among a heterogenous population of mentors from different early learning centers in order to examine more broadly how mentors' identities impact their experiences. The relationship between institutional support and mentors' experience and how they define and view

their identity need to be explored due to how the institution participants of this study work and the influence it has on their mentorship.

## Conclusion

The current study's findings demonstrate that through the reflection for meaning and action framework, reflecting on their identity and how it influenced their identities, mentors have been able to be reflective and international when they engage in mentorship. Mentors always reflect on their knowledge and the mentees they work with in order to find an amicable place where both the mentor and the mentee cultivate and maintain relationships and work environments that promote learning and support. These findings demonstrate that mentor's identities influence their experiences through positioning them to view authentic empowerment and vulnerability as necessary in a mentorship. The role mentors' identities plays not only influence their professional development but in turn influences their approaches to mentorship which impacts the available experiences for mentees.

## REFERENCES


Aspfors, J. and Fransson, G., (2015). Research on mentor education for mentors of newly qualified teachers: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Teaching and teacher education*, 48, 75–86

Bell, J., Wilcoxen, C., & Steiner, A. (2022). Mentoring and Coaching through Induction to Develop Reflective Practices in Beginning Teachers. *The New Educator, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2022.2104982

Bleach, J. (2020), "Mentoring and coaching and their relationship to management and leadership in early education", in Gasper, M. and Walker, R. (Eds), *Mentoring and Coaching in Early Childhood Education, Bloomsbury Academic*, London, New York, pp. 27-36.

Bukor, E. (2015). Exploring teacher identity from a holistic perspective: Reconstructing and reconnecting personal and professional selves. *Teachers and teaching*, *21*(3), 305-327. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2014.953818

Burchinal, M., Whitaker, A. A., & Jenkins, J. M. (2022). The promise and purpose of early care and education. *Child Development Perspectives*, *16*(3), 134-140.

Charness, G., & Chen, Y. (2020). Social identity, group behavior, and teams. *Annual Review of Economics*, 691-713. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics091619-032800

Chu, M. (2016). What's missing in most of our early childhood degrees? Focusing more deeply on relationships and learning with infants, toddlers, and their families. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, *37*(4), 264-281. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2016.1241966

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The psychologist*, *26*(2).

Colley, H. (2003). *Mentoring for social inclusion: A critical approach to nurturing mentor relationships*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203458310

Deaux, K. (1994). Social identity. *Psychologist-leicester-*, *7*, 259-259.

Doan, L. K. (2013). Mentoring: A strategy to support novice early childhood educators. *Canadian Children*, 38(2), 21–24. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v38i2.15447.

Docan-Morgan, T. (2011). "Everything Changed": Relational Turning Point Events in College Teacher–Student Relationships from Teachers' Perspectives. *Communication Education*, *60*(1), 20-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2010.497223

Dreer, B. (2021), "The significance of mentor–mentee relationship quality for student teachers' well-being and flourishing during practical field experiences: a longitudinal analysis", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 101-117. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-07-2020-0041

Duffy-Fagan, M., Newman, L., & Leggett, N. (2021). Critically reflective mentoring within team-based leadership: 'having conversations that matter'. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.2006798

Fleming, T. (2018). Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning. In V. Wang (Eds.), *Critical Theory and Transformative Learning* (pp. 120-136). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-6086-9.ch009

Forsbach-Rothman, T. (2007). The mentor role: Is training necessary? *Journal of In-service Education, 33*(2), 245-247. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674580701293135

Gardiner, W., & Weisling, N. (2018). Challenges and complexities of developing mentors' practice: Insights from new mentors. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education,* 7(4), 329–342. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-12-2017-0078

Goldhaber D., Krieg J., Theobald R. (2018). Does the match matter? Exploring whether student teaching experiences affect teacher effectiveness. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(2), 325-359.

Goldhaber, D. (2019). Evidence-Based Teacher Preparation: Policy Context and What We Know. *Journal of Teacher Education,* 70(2), 90–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487118800712

Goldhaber, D., Krieg, J., Naito, N., & Theobald, R. (2020). Making the most of student teaching: The importance of mentors and scope for change. *Education Finance and Policy*, 15(3), 581-591. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00305

Hagenauer, G., Waber, J., & De Zordo, L. (2021). 'She never actually let you walk into a trap': exploring relational turning point events in the mentor–mentee relationship in the practicum. *Professional Development in Education*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1876155

Hairon, S., Loh, S. H., Lim, S. P., Govindani, S. N., Tan, J. K. T., & Tay, E. C. J. (2020). Structured mentoring: Principles for effective mentoring. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, *19*(2), 105-123. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-019-09251-8

Hardavella, G., Aamli-Gaagnat, A., Saad, N., Rousalova, I., & Sreter, K.B. (2017). How to give and receive feedback effectively. *Breathe* (Sheff), 13(4), 327–333.

Henderson, M., Phillips, M., Ryan, T., Boud, D., Dawson, P., Molloy, E., & Mahoney, P. (2019). Conditions that enable effective feedback. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(7), 1401–1416

Henderson, M., Phillips, M., Ryan, T., Boud, D., Dawson, P., Molloy, E., & Mahoney, P. (2019). Conditions that enable effective feedback. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(7), 1401–1416

Hudson, P. (2016). Forming the mentor-mentee relationship. *Mentoring & tutoring: partnership in learning,* 24(1), 30-43. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2016.1163637

Hunter, D., McCallum, J., & Howes, D. (2019). Defining exploratory-descriptive qualitative (EDQ) research and considering its application to healthcare. *Journal of Nursing and Health Care*, *4*(1).

Isik-Ercan, Z., & Perkins, K. (2017). Reflection for meaning and action as an engine for professional development across multiple early childhood education teacher contexts. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 38(4), 342–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2017.1394935

Jevtic, A.V., and Rogulj, E. (2022), "“Should we get support or just guidelines?” (self) assessment on mentoring of early childhood education students", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 11(3), 262-273. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-03-2021-0048

Keiler, L. S., Diotti, R., & Hudon, K. (2020). Supporting teachers as they support each other: Lessons concerning mentor teacher feedback to teacher mentees. *Professional Development in Education*, 1-18.https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1839781

Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical teacher*, *42*(8), 846-854. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030

Kitchenham, A. (2008). The evolution of John Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Journal of transformative education*, *6*(2), 104-123.

Knight, J. (2017). The impact cycle: What instructional coaches should do to foster powerful improvements in teaching. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kostere, S., & Kostere, K. (2021). The Generic Qualitative Approach to a Dissertation in the Social Sciences: A Step by Step Guide (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195689

Krieg, J. M., Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2020). Teacher Candidate Apprenticeships: Assessing the Who and Where of Student Teaching. Journal of Teacher Education, 71(2), 218–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119858983

Kutsyuruba, B., & Godden, L. (2019). The role of mentoring and coaching as a means of supporting the well-being of educators and students. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-12-2019-081

Lammert, C., DeWalt, L. M., & Wetzel, M. M. (2020). “Becoming” a mentor between reflective and evaluative discourses: A case study of identity development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 96, 103179. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103179Get

Leggett, N., & Newman, L. (2018). Owning it: Educators’ engagement in researching their own practice.”. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 27(1), 138–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1556539

Mamoon-Al-Bashir, M., Kabir, R., & Rahman, I. (2016). The value and effectiveness of feedback in improving students' learning and professionalizing teaching in higher education. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(16), 38–41

Masantiah, Ch., Pasiphol, S., & Tangdhanakanond, K. (2020). Student and feedback: Which type of feedback is preferable? *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 41(2), 269–274.

Maslova, A., Koval, O., Kotliarova, V., Tkach, M., & Nadolska, Y. (2022). On the Way to Successful Learning and Teaching: Constructive Feedback. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, 22(6), 113–122. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v22i6.5233

Matsumoto-Royo, K., & Ramírez-Montoya, M. S. (2021). Core practices in practice-based teacher education: A systematic literature review of its teaching and assessment process. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 70, 101047. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2021.101047

McGill, I. and Brockbank, A. (2012) Facilitating Reflective Learning: coaching, mentoring and supervision. 2nd edition. Kogan Page Ltd.

Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 32 (1), 3– 24. doi:10.1177/074171368103200101

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, *1997*(74), 5-12.

Mezirow, J. (2009). Transformative learning theory. In J. Mezirow, E. W. Taylor & Associates (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., and Saldana, J., (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook. 3rd* ed. Los Angeles, CA; SAGE. doi:10.1177/239700221402800402

NAEYC. (2012). 2010 NAEYC standards for initial and advanced early childhood professional preparation programs. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/accreditation/higher-ed/naeyc-higher-ed-accreditation-standards.pdf

Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, (2011). Early Learning Mentor Coach Study - Survey Tools & Protocols. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/early-learning-mentor-coach-study-survey-tools-protocols

Orland-Barak, L. (2021). Breaking Good: Mentoring for Teacher Induction at the Workplace. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5474-4334

Orland-Barak, L., & Wang, J. (2021). Teacher Mentoring in Service of Preservice Teachers' Learning to Teach: Conceptual Bases, Characteristics, and Challenges for Teacher Education Reform. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 72(1), 86–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119894230

Phillips-Jones, L. (2000) The Mentor's Guide. Grass Valley, CA: Coalition of Counseling Centers (CCC)/The Mentoring Group. *Practical workbook for mentors*.

Reinhardt, K. (2017). Beyond the practical aspects of learning to teach: Mentoring teacher candidates toward the diverse needs of students. *Texas A&M University-Corpus* Christi

Rojas, C. J., Ninoles, F. J., & Madrid, B. J. P. (2021). The construction of teachers' professional identity: An analysis of subjective learning experiences. *European Journal of Teacher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1905627

Russell, M. L., & Russell, J. A. (2011). Mentoring Relationships: Cooperating Teachers' Perspectives on Mentoring Student Interns. *Professional Educator*, 35(1).

Sachs, J. (2005). Teacher Education And The Development Of Professional Identity: Learning To Be A Teacher1. In *Connecting policy and practice* (pp. 5-21). Routledge.

Schwartz, S. J., Zamboanga, B. L., & Weisskirch, R. S. (2008). Broadening the study of the self: Integrating the study of personal identity and cultural identity. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *2*(2), 635-651. **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00077.x**

Sewell, A., Hansen, S., & Weir, K. (2017). Enhancing the capabilities of associate teachers in the practicum: A New Zealand case study. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies,52*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-017-0078-z

Shanks, R. (2017), "Mentoring beginning teachers: professional learning for mentees and mentors", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 158-163.

Squires, V. (2019), "The well-being of the early career teacher: a review of the literature on the pivotal role of mentoring", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 255-267.

Sunde, E., & Ulvik, M. (2014). School leaders' views on mentoring and newly qualified teachers' needs. *Education inquiry*, *5*(2), 23923.https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v5.23923

Ulla, & Larsen, A. S. (2021). Humble Hopes in Mentorship and Education: Thinking with Temporality. *Education Sciences*, 11(10), 635–. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11100635

Ulvik, M., & Sunde, E. (2013). The impact of mentor education: Does mentor education matter? *Professional Development in Education*, 39(5), 754, 770. doi:10.1080/19415257.2012.754783

Vesely, A. K., Saklofske, D. H., & Nordstokke, D. W. (2014). EI training and pre-service teacher wellbeing. *Personality and individual differences*, *65*, 81-85

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: *Harvard University Press*

Ward, J. K., Comer, U., & Stone, S. (2018). On qualifying qualitative research: Emerging perspectives and the "Deer" (descriptive, exploratory, evolutionary, repeat) paradigm. *Interchange, 49*(1), 133-146.

Zhukova, O., (2018). Novice teachers' concerns, early professional experiences and development: implications for theory and practice. *Discourse and communication for sustainable education,* 9 (1), 100–114. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/dcse-2018-0008

# APPENDIX

**Table 1. Themes**

| Themes | Codes | Patterns | Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Identity Composition** | Social Identity | Held identities<br><br>Visible identities<br><br>Vocations<br><br>Ethnicity and religiosity | ” *I’ve worked with a lot of Assistant Teachers, Co teachers, so I have a lot of experience with people at head start*”-Simmy<br><br>*“I am a woman. I am White. I am a Christian. I do have dogs and I have the privilege of owning a house. I am from Tennessee.”* Zama<br><br>“*I'm a teacher. I've been a teacher. I'm a mom. I like gardening and baking. Generally, I consider myself artsy, not in painting or anything like that, but I love theater. I love dance and performance music, and I consider myself generally a nerd. I love all the classic nerd things*.” Amo |
| | Cultural Identity | Traditions<br><br>Beliefs<br><br>Location where one was raised<br><br>Place of residence<br><br>Economic position | “*I grew up in Maine. Very White City. A lot of people assume that it's just farms, but I did grow up in a city. It was very safe, like we didn't lock our doors. We roamed about the neighborhood. I walked to school and back by myself.”* Simmy<br><br>*“I would say like middle class to upper middle class, I did not go to private school, but I went to charter schools. So, I had the benefits of small classes, exceptional education project based, those types of things, some of those which I think carry over to my work right now.”* Zama<br><br>“*So in middle school, I started to, you know, be around other people and had friends that were more diverse and that continued into high school. I was back around the people who were growing* |

**Table 1. continued**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *up with the same demographic as me and like it, it felt more homey, I guess, and I didn't feel like out of place, even though skin color was different."* Daya<br><br>*"The reason I got into like wanted to be in this role is because I have a love of learning and curiosity and I think that these relationships and social emotional learning are also important and I want to pass that on to teachers who are going into maybe more traditional structured environments and public schools and let them know that if anything, they can take with them that these relationships are so important."* Zama |
| **Authentic Empowerment in Practice** | Mentee Identity Development | Goals and growth<br><br>Comfort and trust<br><br>Validation<br><br>Mentees being the center for experiences<br><br>Intentionality in conversations | "*Pretty similar personal and professionally because I really, really value authenticity and in a work environment I value being able to be yourself and being whoever, you are bringing to the table*." Zama<br><br>*"They're just different ways. And more effective ways that things could be happening. So really inviting them to the conversation and helping them to, like, look at their practice and figure out what could happen differently."* Daya<br><br>*"I think the first step is that I try to model. Like the level of professionalism or friendliness or trying to put my phone away because that's expected of them."* Zama<br><br>"*I have expertise. Not the expert*." Zama<br><br>*"I try to be direct…, Can you tell me about that or it this is what I saw happen? What do you think happened or where do you think?'* Amo |

**Table 1. continued**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *"I try really hard not to be accusatory*" Daya<br><br>"*My top goal is to help them become the best person that they can be the best version of themselves I found when I was a student years ago. I had a really wonderful mentor and I'm really grateful for her all the time."* Amo<br><br>*"So, I don't ever like to come in with the attitude that I know everything."* Daya<br><br>"*The first few days That I meet them I tell them that I am going to do things differently than what you've probably seen before depending on your experience, or I'm going to suggest some things that feel a little odd to you and that is OK, I can give you more info. You do not have to do everything exactly like I do. The point of this experience is to help you learn more and find your own voice as a teacher*." Zama<br><br>*"I think one of my like main goals is to help them feel a sense of belonging and to help them understand that their work is important. And that this is a space to learn and figure things out, and that you're not going to be shamed for that, but at the same time pushing them to grow in their pedagogy. And, you know, set goals for themselves*." Daya |
| | Being a Cheerleader to Empower | Program support<br><br>Structural support<br><br>Problem solving and respect. | "*You really need somebody to be a cheerleader*." Simmy<br><br>*I do identify as someone who is compassionate and caring, first and foremost about the people that are with me every day. I take a lot of pride in being a compassionate mentor and a* |

**Table 1. continued**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *compassionate mentor and a compassionate coworker and trying."* Amo<br><br>*"In my classroom, I always, always talk about school family. Like I said it, families are tough, right? And but we're in it together."* Simmy<br><br>"*So being able to listen, being authentic and vulnerable and you know, really trying to get to know each other is a huge part for me because it really does impact how I'm going to give you feedback."* Daya<br><br>"*I would take the role of like emotional or like a supportive coach like that, that cheerleader, like you can do it. You are capable of doing these things and they're hard, but you're doing it."* Amo<br><br>"*Just that balance between professional, like, mentor and, you know, sometimes it does require that we are a friend to a student if they're having a hard time and I think you know, setting the groundwork for that is like, yes, I am your mentor*." Day<br><br>*" I'm like, we're going to work through some coping strategies and I'm going to tell you all the time that it's OK that you're human and you're allowed to say no even to me, and so I try, first and foremost to teach my students that they're OK, they're human and they can't be a perfect teacher all the time because we can't be perfect people all the time*." Amo |
| **Positive Vulnerability** | Respectful Relations hips | Connection<br><br>Mentees as humans with experiences<br><br>Trust | *"I think connection is really important in a mentorship because it requires. Especially the mentee to be vulnerable."* Zama<br><br>"*I think first and foremost is for them to feel seen and accepted*." Amo |

**Table 1. continued**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Positive Vulnerability** | Respectful Relationships | Connection<br><br>Mentees as humans with experiences<br><br>Trust<br><br>Admitting mistakes<br><br>Identity influence on communication | *"I think connection is really important in a mentorship because it requires. Especially the mentee to be vulnerable."* Zama<br><br>"*I think first and foremost is for them to feel seen and accepted*." Amo<br><br>"*The amount of feedback that I give, I really try to tailor to like how much rapport do we have, how much relationship capital is there"* Amo<br><br>*"So, I think that vulnerability, authenticity, valuing connection is really important there. And I have been thinking a lot about how I feel like a lot of my mentorship relationships are pretty successful when me and the mentees connect and have a lot in common."* Zama<br><br>"*They were surprised that I trusted them enough to do that"* Simmy<br><br>"*I get a lot of value and drive to be always learning and even professionally, I'm not afraid to admit that, oh, I didn't know that I'm. Learning more about that*." Zama<br><br>*"I think my goal is for them to be comfortable. Because I think if they're comfortable, they're going to be open to learning."* Zama<br><br>*This kind of contributes to my mentorship. I don't like small talk. I like deep connections and meaningful conversation*." Zama |
| | Creating Safe Spaces and | Beliefs challenged | "*I'm not the only person that is the giver of knowledge, so I hope that that she was able to see that there are many ways to do things."* Zama |

**Table 1. continued**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Equitable Leadership | Academic challenge<br><br>Creating room for growth<br><br>Mentors presented as learners. | "*Vulnerability is a big one. I think they have to know that. I am not there just to criticize them that I'm here for us to continue to grow together and I want to see them succeed. So sometimes that means like taking myself down a notch in front of them."* Zama<br><br>"*I like to ask them about, like, their personality types and are you introverted or extroverted? Do you prefer to discuss things, or do you prefer to have time to like look at written feedback and think about it and write back and respond? Like what works and feels good for you?"* Amo<br><br>"*I am like a problem solver and Co-teacher….. While we have some structure to how mentoring has done, it is mostly about what works for them and I am willing to change to adapt whatever works for them*." Zama<br><br>"*What works for one person. It doesn't work for everyone. And so then it is also the strategy of trying something and being reflective and thinking was that the most supportive, let's see what happens next and then I can adjust what I'm doing to meet."* Simmy<br><br>*"Nope, you got to go back to the drawing board and try something else. For any kind of teaching or any kind of child interactions, it's not always one-size-fits-all so a lot of it is me looking at what I'm doing wrong too."* Zama |

## Data Collection Procedures

### *Interview Protocol*

Hello! Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. This interview is being conducted as part of my Child and Family Studies thesis under the direction of Dr. Caudle. The purpose of this study is to understand how mentors' identities impact their experiences as they mentor pre-service or other in-service teachers.

What you share with me today will be protected and used only for this thesis. I will not share any information with your work or those not involved in this research. Your name will be redacted and a fake name, or pseudonym for you and any places your name will be used. Our conversation today will be recorded, and I will only analyze the audio recording. The video will be deleted right after we leave this meeting. Are you okay with us recording?

This interview is meant to be somewhat conversational but also centered on your experiences. You are an expert in your own experiences as such, at times I may have to ask you to elaborate on certain responses so I can better understand your experiences. Feel free to ask me any clarifying questions at any point, too. So, I'll ask you some questions and then do more listening as you share your experiences, asking follow-up questions throughout. You do not have to share anything you are uncomfortable sharing. If there is something that you are not comfortable sharing you have every right not to. I want you to also know that you can indicate that you are done with the interview at any time when you want to stop and I will respect that and terminate the interview. Your answers will not be judged or used to decide what is true or false. I do not want you to feel uncomfortable during this interview and after. Do you have any questions or concerns so far?

Now we can move on to the consent form. (*We will go ahead and review it together*). Do you have any questions about any part of the consent form? I opted to have verbal consent for participants rather than having participants sign a form. To obtain your consent, I have two questions to ask you. Do you agree and consent to participate in my study and know your rights and options regarding opting in and out as we continue? Do you consent to be audio recorded during this interview and research? *(If participants answered yes, we will continue to the interview*.) Thank you for providing verbal consent. Before we begin, do you have any other questions?

### **Part 1: Identity of a Mentor**

1. Please tell us about yourself as in, "I am a teacher, I have two dogs, and I own a home full of thriving houseplants." Paint a picture of your life that's honest and inclusive of who you are in different spaces (home, work, on vacation, at a social gathering). Don't focus too much on perfection; let your creativity bring clarity like you're watching a Polaroid about all the different identities that you hold. What do you see around you? Who is with you? What are you doing? What's informed those identity developments: childhood, your education? The identities can be visible or invisible identities that you hold as a teacher, mentor, and human (race, ethnicity, gender, beliefs, occupation, etc.).

2. Describe the cultural makeup of the school you attended as well as your neighborhood. This could be regarding a specific period such as elementary, high school, or post-high school. What was the school environment and the neighborhood in which you lived like? How did the diversity or cultural make-up of your school compare to the neighborhood and represent itself in the larger community or the city or county school system? Identify the socio-economic, ethnic, religious, gender, social class, and racial make-up of the school, the teachers and administration, your neighborhood, the school board, and the children? How did you and your family fit into the community? How did this impact who you are today?

3. Can you tell me about who you are, including social identities that are most salient or important to you? These identities can include but are not limited to your gender, race, occupation, age, and social class/socioeconomic status.

4. Another identity that is important when looking at one's overall identity and its development is to focus on their professional identity. Can you tell me who you view yourself as professionally? How do you think others view you relating to what you do as your occupation?

5. Describe how you think your identities influence the work you do as a mentor? Describe how others might perceive your identity.

6. What are some of your goals when you mentor someone? Reflecting on this goal (any goal they mentioned), what process or what influenced you to consider making that one of your mentorship goals?

7. Mentors play a lot of different roles, ranging from providing emotional support to being a supervisor to providing expert technical advice. What roles would you say you take on in your mentor work? Probes: teacher/instructor, crisis intervention, advocate, technical expert, problem-solver, collaborative partner, supervisor, emotional supporter, logistical supporter, assistant to the staff you are mentor-coaching. Thank you for sharing that, I wanted to connect these expectations to who you are. Thinking of your identity and culture, what connections can you draw from them and your culture?

Thank you so much. Now I wanted to transition to talk about one part of mentorship that is so important. Relationship building varies and there are different approaches that can be used. I am interested in understanding your experience and approach to how you build relationships with your mentees.

**Part 2: Relationship-Building Experiences**

1. When you think of relationship building, what comes to mind? What skills do you view as necessary for building and cultivating a mentor-mentee relationship? When it comes to building trust, what strategies do you utilize to build that trust with those you mentor?

2. Please think back to your first weeks with any mentee. Please briefly describe what happened during that time regarding how you both worked on building a relationship. What kind of things did you do to welcome the mentee to your classroom? Can you tell me about your approach to

establishing boundaries/ expectations with the mentor in terms of the type of relationship you wanted to cultivate? How do you think your identity influenced that experience for you?

3. Recall an incident where you and your mentee did not see eye to eye. What happened from your perspective? How did your mentee react (verbally or nonverbally)? How did you react (verbally or nonverbally)? How do you think that impacted your relationship either at that time or later on? How do you wish you could have handled the situation differently? How did that impact the way you have dealt with other incidents following that one?

**Part 3 Feedback Strategies**

1. Think about your role as a mentor, what are some strategies and approaches you use to provide feedback to your mentees? You can also discuss any approaches you use to individualize the feedback for each mentor and the results of your approaches.

2. Please tell us about some barriers you have faced when trying to provide effective feedback to a mentee. When a student is having a hard time with the feedback you provided, what strategies do you utilize to help the student understand your feedback and find their own ways to apply it in their own practice?

3. How do you usually provide feedback? (This could be to colleagues, parents, and children, close friends) What are some things that you are mindful of when providing feedback: What is your do's and don'ts when providing feedback as a mentor?

4. Regarding communication, what are some approaches you view as important as a mentor? How do you tend to approach communication with a mentee regarding: your classroom expectations, questions they raise, debriefing about an ongoing area of development where you have provided feedback before, incidents in the classroom, and others?

We are almost done. I have some background information questions that I wanted to ask you.

**Part 4: Background information.**

1. What race do you identify with?

2. How old are you?

3. How many years have you been an early childhood educator?

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

5. What ages have you taught?

6. How many years have you been a mentor?

7. Do you currently have a mentee?

8. What training/support (if any) have you received specifically relating to your role as an Early Learning Mentor Coach?

**Part 5 Closing Section**

1. Finally, what were you expecting to be asked in this interview? Was there anything that was particularly surprising?
2. Are there any final thoughts you wish to reiterate, emphasize, or address that we did not cover?
3. That concludes our interview. Are there any questions that you have for me? *If not,* thank you very much for your time and willingness to share your experiences and perspectives with me.

The last part of the study involves writing a reflective journal about this interview, mentorship in general, challenges, achievements, growth areas, or any topic relating to you and your experience as a mentor. I will share a journal prompt that you can use as a starting point for your reflection. You can provide a hand-written, typed, voice recording or any form of reflection for your journal prompt. Do you have any questions about this task?

Thank you so much for your time and willingness to talk to me about your experience. If questions come up, please feel free to contact me. Be on the lookout for the journal prompt.

Bye

**Reflective Journal Prompt**

Thinking about our conversation about your identity and role as a mentor, is there something you want to share with us? It can relate to your identity as a mentor, your social identity, cultural identity, values and expectations as a mentor, and challenges you have faced as a mentor. You can also talk about what you think can be done better when it comes to supporting you as a mentor to be effective in your role. The focus is on your reflection, and you can use the suggested prompts above to guide your reflection. You are also welcome to share anything about you, your experience and future goals as a mentor.

You can type, handwrite, or do an audio recording to provide a response to this prompt. Thank you.

**Consent for Research Participation**

**Research Study Title:** Mentorship in Early Childhood Education: Understanding Mentor's Social and Cultural Identities' impact on their experiences.

**Researcher(s):** Temvelo Matsebula, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dr. Lori Caudle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I am asking you to participate in this research study because you are either a demonstration teacher or the lead teacher in an early childhood preschool classroom and you serve as a mentor

to a pre-service educator either at the University of Tennessee Early Learning Center or part of the Child and Family Studies Department Early Childhood Teacher Training program mentors. You must have been a mentor for at least three years to participate in this study. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

**Why is the research being done?**

The purpose of the research study is to understand early childhood mentor teachers' experiences serving as mentors for preservice teachers. The focus will be on mentors' social and cultural identities.

**What will I do in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to aim to participate in an interview and complete a journal regarding your identity and mentorship experiences. Your participation in this study is anticipated to take about 2 weeks from showing interest to completion.

**Can I say "No"?**

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Withdrawing from the study at any time will not carry any negative consequences. Your decision won't affect your employment or relationships you might have with the Child and Family Studies Department. You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer during the interviews or journal entries. The main focus will be on your experiences and approach. You can share what you are comfortable sharing with us.

**What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?**

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact me, Temvelo Matsebula or Dr. Lori Caudle, as soon as possible. There will be no negative consequences. Data already collected for this research will not be used. You can withdraw from the study at any time, even after all the data have been collected.

**Are there any risks to me?**

A possible risk of this study may be the discomfort related to discussing topics related to your identity. This risk is minimal because I will ask general questions about identity and what you share will be based on identities that you are comfortable sharing with us. You also have every right to tell us to retract any information you share with us in case you change your mind. Additionally, there may be confidentiality risks because of the small number of participants in this study. It is possible that someone could identify you based on the information I collect. All

measures will be taken to prevent this from happening. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity as well as the school you work at. Participants will be described as educators who work in early childhood classrooms who serve as mentors.

**Are there any benefits to me?**

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the experiences of mentors in a mentorship relationship. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future when it comes to how we view mentorship in ECE and ways to improve the support provided to mentors in terms of their professional development. A thank-you gift card will be provided for completing this study.

**What will happen with the information collected for this study?**

We will keep your information to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers.

**What will happen to my information after this study is over?**

I will not keep your information to use for other research purposes. Your name and other

information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study. I will not share your research data with other researchers.

**Who can answer my questions about this research study?**

If you have questions or concerns about this study or have experienced a research-related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Temvelo Matsebula, tmatsebu@vols.utk.edu, (859)-693-0764 or Dr. Lori Caudle, lcaudle@utk.edu, (828)-246-4466.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I agree to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else. I understand my consent will be obtained through an audio recording format.

# VITA

Temvelo Rejoice Matsebula was born in Sithobela, Lubombo, Eswatini. She attended primary and high school there before moving to the US for her undergraduate studies. She attended Berea College in Kentucky, a liberal arts college where she majored in Biology and Child and Family studies with a focus on child development. Upon completion of her undergraduate degree, she worked with a nonprofit organization that served children in the foster care system with challenging behaviors before pursuing her master's at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. She focused on teachers' professional development and the role of mentorship played regarding teachers' identity in early childhood classrooms. Her goal is to continue exploring child development focusing on teacher training and classroom culture.