

Exploring the Importance of Age Factor in the Delivery and Implementation of Tutorship Programme in Institutions of Higher Learning with Empirical Examples Drawn from One Institution of Higher Learning

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Abstract

Incontrovertibly, the conceptualization and implementation of tutorial programs in many higher education settings can be a panacea if the programme can bolster learning and improve throughputs among the learners of different cadres. Although traditionally tutoring has involved older and more experienced individuals taking charge of the role of assisting others, the age factor has become a critical factor possibly stifling the success of the programme. The study adopted a mixed method approach. Multiple data collection methods were employed through semi structured questionnaires to first year students and focus group discussions with tutors. The study found that age was a strong determinant of tutorial learning. On one hand, younger tutees felt uncomfortable with older tutors who exerted their authority the same way as teachers. On the other hand, some of the more mature first year students were less confident of the younger tutors' support in learning. The study also observed a strong influence of cultural values in the tutee expectations of tutor behaviour. The study recommends that tutor age be considered when allocating tutors to specific tutorial groups. Ongoing awareness workshops and talks on appreciating diversity and the key principles of tutoring need to be conducted with tutors so that they develop skills in handling tutees in a cross age tutoring model.

Keywords: Cross age tutoring, open access policy, structured academic program, individualized support, peer support

1. Problem Statement

Despite the potential benefits accruing from cross age of the tutorship programs, observation from the ground and supported by a few literature sources indicates that the age of tutors could be an important factor determining the consumption, perception and acceptance of tutorial program by tutees. This factor if not checked and addressed could therefore pose challenges to the success of the implementation of the tutorship programme. It is therefore important to empirically determine the extent to which the age of the tutor influences students' learning in higher education settings with the aim of coming up with strategies or approaches to make the tutor programme age friendly. This would definitely ensure optimal dividends in the institutions of learning tutorial programs.

2. Background and Introduction

Observably, many education providers regard the use and implementation of tutorials as one of the chief strategies to support students learning and therefore enhance their learning (Topping, 1998; Shanahan, 1998). Definably, tutoring is a structured student support program where a professional or fellow student provides a safe environment to address various students' academic problems, whether individually or in small groups. When the support is given by a fellow student, it therefore becomes a peer support (Katleen, 2008). Tutorials are structured in such a way that students discuss course content taught by the main teacher in small manageable tasks. This is particularly important for students that are not academically prepared and require more individualized support.

Undeniably, tutorials have been found to positively influence the performance of students who frequently participate in it as opposed to students who are only taught in traditional classes (Volgelwiesche, Crob & Winkler, 2006).

In fact, studies have empirically found that tutorial participation improves writing proficiency (Alsup, 2008), Maths literacy (Topping, 1998), and reading efficiency (Shanahan, 1998). Furthermore, empirical studies also report non cognitive gains in terms of self confidence, improved communication skills, and students' positive attitudes towards their learning (Topping, Campell, Douglas & Smith , 2003).

Due to the need to strengthen learning in many institutions, policies allowing learning gaps to be filled through tutorials have been instituted. In some cases, tutorials are made compulsory for all incoming new entrants. None the less, observations show that most students shun. If research indicates their value as far as learning is concerned, then the phenomenon and environment surrounding their implementation and administration need to be explored (Adams, 2006; Van Schalkwyk, Menkeveld, & Ruiters , 2010).

While reasons may be complex and inconclusive, tutee satisfaction with tutors forms an integral component of tutorial success. In this vein, Gordon (2009) contends that tutor characteristics provide a conducive and learning environment that spurs the learners' fulfillment. Thus, it is central that the characteristics of instructors in any learning setting be assessed for their effectiveness, suitability and possibly efficiency.

Owing to the formation of open access educational policies (UNESCO, 1998), students of mature age find themselves being tutees of more academically experienced tutors. This differs remarkably from traditional cross age tutoring where the tutor is usually both older and more academically experienced than the tutees (Gilliers, 2010). Traditionally, tutors who are much older than tutees are favoured based on the view that they could better deal with academic, social and sometimes emotional aspects of the students which could possibly inhibit learning (De Smet, 2008). Empirical studies on cross age found that in cases where the tutorials are ineffective because some tutors can be too authoritarian to the tutees and this diminish tutee confidence and stifled active participation (Robbinson,G.R Schoefield K.W. &Steers -Wentzell,K.L., 2005). However, there seems to be scanty research on students' views on the new dimension in cross age model.

3. Study Settings and Methods

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

The study employed a mixed method research approach embedded in the post positivst paradigm. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori(2009), mixed method entails combining quantitative and qualitative approaches with the aim of strengthening research validity, reliability and results. This is because one approach covers the weakness or the gaps of the other. Cresswell(2009) contend that mixed method helps researchers in getting a holistic perspective of the phenomenon because multiple approaches are integrated. In this study, both case study and mini survey deigns were employed.

3.2 Research Methods

In this study, multiple data collection methods was adopted.. This was done so that findings could be more credible (Sarantakos, 2005). Specifically, the study employed focus group discussions, questionnaire method and document analysis. Focus group discussions were adopted so as to obtain diverse views from tutors within a shorter timeframe. According to Krueger & Casey (2009), focus groups widen the range of responses. Also focus groups allowe the researcher to modify questions and make further probe so as to get detailed requisite information (Maree, 2007). The document analysis ensured that the researchers obtained description of trends, frequencies and interrelationships among the various activities done in the program including statistical analysis (Bergman, 2008).

Document analysis enabled scrutiny of less subjective information through analysis of orientation program activities, plans and reviews. However, the principal researcher was aware of the flaws of document analysis with respect to currency of information, accessibility of confidential data which could result in misleading data and possibly affect the study results (Babbie, 2010). Therefore, data from document analysis was corroborated with findings from semi structured questionnaire interviews. Semi structured interviews solicited quantitative aspects of phenomenon surrounding students' orientation programs. These methods provided a quick way to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from many first year students on their views of orientation programs implementation.

3.3 Sampling Frame

The sampling frame composed of lists of first year students and lists of tutors employed in the different sections of the

institution (Drew, Hardman, and Hosp, 2008). Precisely, the sampling frames for the study were three thousand first year students and approximately one thousand two hundred tutors.

3.4 *Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis for this study constituted of 150 first year students and 40 trained tutors supporting students in the year 2013. These participants were classified into young and old based on their age. Any tutor who was less than thirty years was regarded as young while those above thirty years were regarded as mature. Also given that most students traditionally enroll in higher education around 18 years, all first year students of age below 21 years were regarded as young tutees while those above were classified as mature students.

3.5 *Sample selection and procedure*

The tutors were selected purposively from those taking part in the tutorial program offered by the academic development centre. Purposive sampling was ideal because of the need to select participants who met the researchers' criteria (Cresswell, 2009). The tutors who had undergone training had a clearer understanding of tutorial principles as well as pedagogical strategies to support diverse students.

On the other hand, the 150 first students who responded to semi-structured questionnaires were randomly selected based on availability and willingness to participate in the study. According to Drew, Hardman, and Hosp (2008), simple random sampling allows researchers to represent elements of the wider population. In this study, it was important to have students' representation in terms of age so as to understand their perspectives on tutoring. The study therefore had 105 younger tutees and 45 mature tutees. On the other hand, there were 30 mature tutors and 10 young tutors.

3.6 *Research Domain*

The research site comprised of a public higher education institution in South Africa. The selection criteria considered the phenomenon of being a public university and willingness of the institution to participate in the study. Most public universities in South Africa apply open admission policies. They therefore attract students from diverse learning and socio-economic backgrounds (Blitzer, 2004). Observably, some of the students are poorly prepared for higher education due to inadequate learning resources and social circumstances (Scott et al., 2007). Therefore, such students need intensive academic support for them to feel comfortable in the higher education settings.

Precisely, the characteristic of being a public university implies that a large number of none traditional students such as first generation, mature students, non-resident students are admitted. Observably also, students from rural communities usually have academic and socio-economic needs that need to be immediately addressed if they are to expeditiously pursue their education. This characteristic may imply that the majority of the students may not be well prepared for higher education due to the limited availability of learning resources (Longden, 2004; Scott et al., 2007). Therefore, most of the students are likely to have adjustment problems as the key potential dropout risk factor, hence orientation is key and paramount.

3.7 *Ethical and legal considerations*

Letters of permission obtained from the research ethics committees of the two institutions were used to gain access to the research respondents and participants. Besides the permission from the gatekeepers, permission was also sought from each of the participants who voluntarily participated in the study (Silverman, 2011). This was achieved through a letter explaining the purpose of the study and an accompanying consent form to confirm willingness to participate. The principal researcher upheld the confidentiality of participants by using codes and pseudonyms when presenting and reporting on the data (Bergman, 2008). Participants were not compelled to disclose information. Interviews were tape recorded pending approval and consent of the respective respondents. For those who did not want to be voice recorded, the gesture was respected.

3.8 *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

The data for the research was analyzed both deductively and inductively. Inductive analyses involved forming qualitative themes especially from the participants' verbatim sentiments. Deductively, the opinions and thinking of the respondents

formed themes based on the quantification of the frequencies of the respondents.

3.9 Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has to deal with the way the researcher claims that the research is “worth paying attention to” or accurate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This was achieved through tape-recording focus group interviews in a bid to get accurate results. The questionnaire was pilot tested on tutees before making modifications used on the final version.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

The study appreciated the fact that there are complex and related factors which influence the success of tutorial programs (Topping., 2001). Therefore, a finding concerning perceptions on age is just one component which may not reflect all the challenges in tutoring programs. The other limitation was that the study did not include views of tutor trainers and lecturers who are also important stakeholders in the running of tutorials. Their views could also have enriched the study findings.

4. Findings

4.1 The age of the tutors affected the uptake of tutorials and learning

On the delivery of tutorials, findings indicated that the age of the tutors was a factor that influenced whether the learners embraced and accepted their tutorials. Some tutees never respected or embraced the tutors who were younger than them. The following table illustrates sentiments from the tutors:

The challenge I am experiencing is that some of the students are not accepting me because I am younger than them. I find myself being belittled by the people I am supposed to assist and this is frustrating. (FFG, 2,1)
I have noticed that the mature students who have been out of school for some time struggle to recall concepts. So I usually ask them to work in groups so as to share. But this pairing is not successful because of too much dependence (FFG3,4)

The findings above indicate a challenge of tutee acceptance of the tutors based on age. This scenario presents a stressful state of affairs for the tutors who were undermined, yet were expected to support the tutees. Undoubtedly, the above scenario shows that the age factor was not factored in when selecting the tutors, but rather competence was considered important. It also shows that the program directors ignored the main conditions of cross age tutoring, that of being more knowledgeable and older.

Apparently, the study shows that tutee competence and age also influenced the success of the collaborative learning strategy used in the tutorial session to foster learning. In this instance, mature tutees who had been out of school for a longer time were experiencing learning gaps that needed more intensive support. The group learning strategy was not working because tutees lacked self efficacy, causing them to become too dependent on others in group based tasks. The challenge for the tutors was how to ensure that each student is active and confident to contribute his or her ideas in a safe environment. The above finding points to the challenges encountered when employing student centred techniques to improve their learning and motivation (Davies, 1999). Importantly, tutoring ought to involve active participation so as to enhance the development of competencies in logical arguments, independent thinking and communication (Trigwell & Ashton, 2003). Perhaps student pairing strategy could be more appropriate because it forces all students to share ideas corporately (Topping, 2001). As indicated by Ender & Newton (2000), tutoring ensures that knowledge is reciprocally shared among the students rather than one way transmission from the tutor to the student.

4.2 The elderly tutors were stigmatized by the younger tutees

Contrary to the elderly tutees not embracing the younger tutors, there were mixed views concerning tutors who were elderly. On one hand, some tutees preferred them as they viewed them as more knowledgeable (Vogelwiesche, Crob & Winkler, 2006). However the majority of the tutees wanted peers to serve as tutors because they could easily relate with them and share their learning and other social concerns. Table 1 below has recorded the tutees sentiments below:

Table 1: Young tutee views about cross age tutoring

Aspect N=105	Participant classification	Percent
Tutees not afraid to ask questions from same age tutor	Young	44
Tutees preferring tutors of their age and those they can share their mother tongue	Young	23
Older tutors sometimes treat us like high school kids, so its better to have those who are like us	Young	26
Older tutors have the knowledge but we fear them	Young	14
Total		100

The above findings show that first year students preferred tutors of the same age and in some cases those they would relate in the same language. Many tutees did not want older tutors because of the power dynamics that age brought and this stifled learning. This leads these researchers to think that although the student support programmes had their own selection criteria that did not factor the age of the tutors, it is high time that such a factor is given ample weight as empirically it is found to negatively influence learning.

4.3 Age prompted viewing tutorials from cultural lenses

On the aspect of age, the study found that there was strong cultural interpretation of the relationship between the elderly and the young. This is because the elderly tutees viewed being tutored by younger tutors who qualified to be of the age of their children as an embarrassment and to some extent not culturally acceptable.. The table below summarises the insights from the mature tutees.

Table 2: Mature First year views about tutoring

Aspect N=45	Tutee category	Percentage
Fearing that young tutors are bound to have cultural shortcomings	Mature	20
Distrusting tutor capacity to teach	Mature	15
Fear learning challenges will be discussed among other students.	Mature	10
Not worried about the age of tutor as long as they have professional skills to support me in learning	Mature	5
Total		45

The responses above clearly indicates that most of the mature tutees were not confident with the younger tutors. Viewed from cultural lenses, the elderly were the ones who should be giving the younger the advice, direction and culture believed advance in age was associated with wisdom. Therefore, the elderly tutee-younger tutors appeared to disregard this cultural norm and arrangement. For the younger tutees not accepting the elderly tutors, this may not be a cultural phenomenon, but an inconvenience in that the younger tutees expected to be tutored by their peers.

4.4 Age was an important aspect of diversity working against learning

Research findings realized that age constituted an important factor of diversity that negatively affected the success of the tutorials. This brings a revelation to the researchers to recommend that before tutorial programmes are conceptualized, many factors which are diversity oriented such as age that could be suspected to influence tutorial success needed to be factored in. Apparently in the institutions studied, the impact of age as an important component of diversity had not been factored in.

5. Discussion

This study which sought tutor and tutee views and experiences on the importance of age in the delivery of tutorials was premised on the assumption that students' expectations and perceptions of tutor characteristics influence their learning. The study found that age diversity became an impediment to tutorial learning. As such, the differing age between the tutor and tutees had strong influence on acceptance, expectations and conduct of the tutees. This supports the view that if not well handled, diversity can inhibit learning (Gurin et al, 2002). In this study, age differences became a challenge in that older tutees distrusted the competence of younger tutors as well as their ability to uphold confidentiality. This implies that that older students prefer a learning environment where they would feel safe from having their shortcomings publicly exposed. Previous studies elsewhere have also revealed that tutees can shun assistance (Dryden and Reeves, 2008).

Therefore, the scenario above points to the need for the tutorial program administrators in the institutions studied to consider the age factor when allocating tutors to specific tutee cohorts.

On another angle, when the tutees were asked to indicate their preference concerning age of tutors, the majority of the younger tutees preferred a tutor of the same age than an elderly tutor. This is because they felt more comfortable to express their concerns to someone of their own age. This finding aligns to social learning theories which put emphasis on using peers in learning because they serve as safety nets (Tinto, 1998). In this case, tutors of the same age were perceived as able to easily link content to authentic experiences so that students can easily understand (Ender & Newton, 2000). It appears as if younger tutees in this study were not free to express their learning concerns. Therefore, this limited tutees active participation. In this light, age frustrated both the cognitive and affective goals of building confidence, self efficacy, locus of control and learning for tutees (Vogelwiesche, Crob & Winkler, 2006). This scenario calls for ongoing professional training of older tutors to develop personalities that will make them free from being non judgmental, embrace active listening and facilitative teaching so as to meet the students learning needs. Such qualities have been proved to increase students' confidence, equality and ownership of the learning process (Powell, 2005).

Undeniably, the study also revealed a strong influence of cultural values in the expectations of tutees. For instance older tutee resistance to younger tutors can be a reflection of cultural beliefs concerning the relationship between age and taking instructions (Reeves & Dryden, 2008). In the African context, older people give orders to younger people and not vice versa. Therefore, the younger tutees found it difficult to challenge the older tutees that were undermining them.

6. Way Forward

Undoubtedly, findings from the study reveals that differing age between the tutor and the tutees negatively stifled tutorial goals. For this reason, older tutors who support young tutees ought to have personalities that are welcoming as well as embrace professional pedagogical knowledge to support younger tutors who are likely to be fearing them. In the current study, the practice of using younger tutors to support mature students was not apparently beneficial. Therefore, tutorial program co-ordinators should appoint older or same age tutors if various students expectations are to be met. Further, alternative tutoring model using peer approach may need to be factored in the current student support to curb the challenge of age differences. Since the higher education system heavily rely on tutoring for academic student support, there maybe need to reconsider other models of student support that can promote academic skills, cultural as well as social needs of the diverse students who are enrolled in higher education.

7. Conclusion

Incontrovertibly, the age difference between and among the tutees, as well as the difference in age between the tutors and the tutees are factors that undoubtedly influence the quality of tutorship programme. This sends a clarion call to the programme coordinators of the programme to factor in the age factor while conceptualizing and implementing the programme. The tutorship programme, therefore needs to make an autopsy of all the factors either strengthening as well as those undermining the success of the programme. The programme need to be diversity friendly and need to consider the impacts of all the diversity factors and work out modalities to weaken or mitigate them.

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