

Experience report of Mentoring in health students: repercussion and dialectic

Relato de experiência de Mentoring em estudantes da área da saúde: repercussões e dialética

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The undergraduate student's mental health has been a concern in higher education institutions (HEIs). In order to promote comprehensive training and minimize these problems, some strategies have been offered by HEIs, such as mentoring programs. **Objective:** To report the experience of a mentoring program, which has been under development for 6 years, among undergraduate students in the health area, in a private institution. **Experience report:** The Mentoring Program of the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences of Juiz de Fora (FCMS/JF – Suprema) started to be implemented, gradually in 2016, as mandatory and homogeneous in terms of period and course. In 2019, the program was restructured, becoming optional, with students from different periods. In 2021, in a pandemic context, we inaugurated e-mentoring at the institution. **Discussion:** Mentoring can be a preventive intervention, helping students to recognize their weaknesses and strengths in their academic and later professional lives. Through this strategy, the mentor, a reference for the student, can report his own experience that may be similar to that experienced by the young student. And together, develop objectives to face the aspects reported during the mentoring groups and follow up on demands during the meetings. **Conclusion:** The way of organizing the program, the mentoring environment, the mentor profile and institutional support are important conditions to be considered for the program to be an effective support tool for those involved in the process.

Keywords: Mentoring; Mentors; Students; Medical Education.

RESUMO

Introdução: A saúde mental do estudante de graduação tem sido motivo de preocupação nas instituições de ensino superior (IES). Com o objetivo de promover uma formação integral e minimizar esses problemas, algumas estratégias têm sido oferecidas pelas IES, como os programas de Mentoring. **Objetivo:** Relatar a experiência de um programa de Mentoring, em desenvolvimento há 6 anos, entre estudantes da graduação da área da saúde, em uma instituição privada. **Relato de Experiência:** O Programa de Mentoring da Faculdade de Ciências Médicas e da Saúde de Juiz de Fora (FCMS/JF – Suprema) começou a ser implementado, de forma gradativa em 2016 como obrigatório e homogêneo em termos de período e curso. Em 2019 foi realizada uma reestruturação do programa que passou a ser opcional e composto por estudantes de diferentes períodos. No ano de 2021, em um contexto pandêmico, foi inaugurado o e-Mentoring na Instituição. **Discussão:** O Mentoring pode ser uma intervenção preventiva, auxiliando o

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estudante a reconhecer as suas fragilidades e fortalezas em sua vida acadêmica e posterior vida profissional. Por meio desta estratégia, o mentor, referência para o discente, pode relatar sua própria experiência que pode ser similar à vivenciada pelo jovem estudante, e juntos desenvolver objetivos de enfrentamento dos aspectos relatados durante os grupos de mentoria e acompanhamento das demandas ao longo dos encontros. **Conclusão:** O modo de organização do Programa, o ambiente do Mentoring, o perfil do mentor e o suporte institucional são condições importantes a serem consideradas para que o programa seja uma ferramenta de suporte efetiva aos envolvidos no processo.

Palavras-chave: Tutoria; Orientação profissional; Estudantes de Ciências da Saúde; Educação médica.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health of university students, in general, has been a cause for concern in the context of educational institutions due to the high prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression, risk of suicide, and low quality of life, becoming a problem in the health field. and may affect academic performance^(1,2).

There are many factors, both individual and institutional, that can influence this scenario. At an individual level, the stress of the selection process, the end of adolescence, moving house and separating from parents, sleep deprivation, consumption of alcohol and other drugs, as well as pre-existing mental disorders can be mentioned. At the institutional level, the new academic environment, the teaching-learning methodology, the evaluation system, competitiveness, and the curricular structure constitute elements of this context⁽²⁾.

In this way, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have thought about the importance of the integral training of their students as critical, reflective individuals, with humanistic and ethical characteristics, with communication skills in interpersonal relationships, based on the National Curricular Guidelines (NCG, 2001) for health courses. Thus, to promote this training and minimize the mental health problems of the university population, some strategies have been offered by HEIs, such as mental health services with psychological, psychiatric, and pedagogical support, and even broader interventions, aimed at the global student development, such as Mentoring programs⁽³⁻⁵⁾.

Mentoring aims to create a relationship between a more experienced person (the mentor) and a young beginner on his journey, stimulating and guiding him on the path of personal and professional development, used in the academic context and professional training, which can happen in a spontaneous and informal or in a formalized and systematized manner⁽⁴⁾. Although Mentoring is a well-recognized strategy in educational practice as an intervention in the learning environment, some studies point to low scientific evidence, probably due to the heterogeneity of approaches described in the literature⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries adopted social distancing measures to contain the spread of the virus, which negatively affected the mental health of the population. In Brazil, these measures resulted in the suspension of in-person academic activities from March 2020. Learning continued through emergency remote teaching, using digital platforms for this purpose. In this context, there was an increase in psychological suffering evidenced by the Burnout phenomenon, and a decrease in interest in studies⁽⁶⁾. Mentoring can be a possible resource to be used in distance academic support, as it values relationships and the exchange of experience of those involved, as well as communication⁽⁴⁾.

Aiming at encouraging the application of Mentoring and reflect on its role in academic training, the aim of the present study is to report the experience of a Mentoring program, in development for 6 years, among undergraduate students of Nursing, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Medicine and Dentistry courses.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

This descriptive study approaches an experience report, regarding a mentoring Program at the School of Medical and Health Sciences (FCMS/JF-SUPREMA), a private Higher Education Institution founded in 2002, which presents a curricular proposal of hybrid teaching model with expository classes together with active teaching-learning methodologies: Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), Team-Based Learning (TBL) and JIGSAW.

The report was structured based on the explanations of students and teachers, recorded in evaluation forms of the Program, which was inaugurated in 2016 and is still ongoing. The study was approved by the Institution's Research Ethics Committee, under number CAAE 43408621.8.0000.5103.

The mentoring program began to be implemented gradually in 2016, starting from the first period of all courses offered by the Institution - Nursing, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Medicine, and Dentistry - The aim of monitoring the Program is to support the students' academic life during graduation; develop student

knowledge, skills and attitudes; closer bond development, more intense and institutionalized bonds between teachers and students; identify problems in training, thus allowing a more immediate referral to the appropriate solution, such as through the Institution's Faculty and Student Support Center (SSC).

Initially, FCMS/JF-SUPREMA teachers were trained to perform the role of mentor and this training occurs periodically, at the beginning of each semester, through workshops, world café, and other active and reflective forms. In the beginning, mentoring activity was seen as indispensable and institutional; the academics were divided into groups of 10 to 12 students, with a responsible mentor professor, who would provide them with support and guidance throughout their degree, longitudinally, developing a closer and institutionalized bond.

The groups were composed of students from the same course and graduation period, randomly formed, and the system was operated by the Program secretariat. The meetings took place three times a semester (totaling six meetings per year), with times and locations agreed between mentors and students, with participation being mandatory. In these meetings, academic issues were addressed based on the demands of the students themselves. The mentor had to record and describe the meeting in a report and the secretariat controlled the attendance of the Program based on this report, which was signed by mentors and students.

To achieve the proposed objectives, strategies were established that relied on the work of four main bodies: coordination, mentor teachers, students, and the Program secretariat. The secretariat is responsible for facilitating, evaluating, and improving it on a daily basis. In this attempt, at the end of the semester, an evaluation instrument was distributed to students so that they could report the weaknesses and strengths of the experience. As a strength, during this period, it was noted the establishment of a solid and trusting bond between the mentor and his students, in addition to the opportunity for exchange between colleagues and teachers, as a means of providing welcome and guidance, and an adherence of 75% of teachers to participate in the Program. As a weakness, we can list the non-attendance of some students at scheduled meetings; the non-compliance with the previous schedule by some teachers, and the non-completion of the student form (record of meetings), with reports of the need to better schedule meeting dates.

At this stage, 85 mentor teachers and 822 students were involved in the process. However, from the second semester of 2019, based on information obtained in a study performed by Secchin et al.⁽⁵⁾ to evaluate the effect of implementing mentoring at the Institution, it was noted that there was no significant difference in the students included in the Program and that adherence was

low, identifying the need for changes. In this way, the Program was restructured and, from the second semester of 2019, it became an optional activity for students, who had to register to demonstrate interest in participating.

When registering, the student should choose up to three names of mentors available on the Institution's website, to accompany them that semester. Each professor would be responsible for a heterogeneous group (different periods of graduation, but the same course) of 10 to 12 students who chose him as their mentor. Students who had already participated in the Program previously had priority in keeping their mentor if they wished. At the end of the semester, the student who attended 100% of mentoring meetings would receive a declaration of participation with a workload of 10 hours for Complementary Activity and would have to fill out an evaluation form with self-evaluation, process evaluation, and evaluation of the mentor.

In this second moment (2019), the optional mentoring activity involved the participation of 49 teachers and 368 students, and there was a proportional increase in participation by both students and teachers. However, in this new model, the heterogeneity of the groups, composed of students from different periods of graduation, with different timetables, created the challenge of scheduling meetings in which all students could attend simultaneously, and there was no protected moment in the curriculum to perform mentoring, making it difficult to function.

In the first half of 2020, with the interruption of face-to-face classes in accordance with guidelines from the competent bodies for the prevention of COVID-19, the Program was suspended, being resumed for the period referring to the second half of the same year (2020/2). Thus, in 2021, with the situation of the new Coronavirus pandemic, students who joined the Institution this year were automatically enrolled in the mentoring program and held meetings through the same digital platform used to present classes remotely. The main objective at this time is greater integration and acceptance of the students with the new academic environment in which they find themselves. With closer interaction between the teacher and the student, the student has someone to act as a facilitator and a communication channel between them and the Institution. The mentor actively welcomes his student upon entering graduation, given the complexity of situations experienced in this context, added to the change in the teaching-learning model, and will accompany him in the first year of college. From then on, mentoring will be an activity offered to students as an optional activity. This new model has not yet been evaluated, but it inaugurates a third phase of the mentoring program with the virtual mentoring or e-mentoring model.

DISCUSSION

This report sought to understand the experience of students and teachers in the Mentoring Program, since their entry into undergraduate studies, through records in the program's evaluation forms and the study by Secchin et al.⁽⁵⁾, which started in 2016 and is ongoing. As a strength, we observed an increase in attendance, indicating interest from students and mentor teachers. On the other hand, we have challenges that permeate the practice of mentoring, indicating, at times, the need for change, reflection, and adaptations to the reality experienced.

In the academic sphere, students' transition to higher education is described as one of the most stressful phases of graduation, full of new things and with immature psychosocial development in force. Since stressful lifestyles continue even after graduation, a college degree is a critical window for developing and utilizing functional and effective coping strategies to manage mental health problems⁽⁷⁾.

In this way, recognizing the existence of students' mental suffering can help the teacher in identifying and referring them to support services present at the HEI. mentoring meetings, one of the moments in which students can feel free to talk about their personal and professional life aspects, can enable preventive and health-promoting interventions. By bringing perspectives regarding him as a student now and as graduation student later, and his future confrontation in the job market, it can enable him to learn, since graduation, to take care of himself (with a specialized professional) to take care of others, in his work path.

In this sense, review studies have demonstrated that the Mentoring Program can provide students with better communication skills and coping skills, an increased sense of responsibility, in addition to reducing stress and the risk of burnout^(2,5). It is one of the preventive interventions that can help students recognize their weaknesses and strengths in their academic life and later professional life.

Through this strategy, the mentor teacher, a reference for the student, will be able to report his experience and bring to light issues that are being experienced by the students, similar to what he witnessed during his undergraduate period. This way, together, they will be able to build strategies to deal with the aspects reported during the Mentoring groups and monitor demands throughout the meetings.

Mentoring, a special type of academic support, is a dynamic, full-time tool, with freedom to approach topics related or not to the curriculum, in which both parties define and redefine their responsibilities; and in the act of exchange, they learn, relearn, and teach; which gives great relevance to the method⁽⁴⁾.

In the way the Program is organized, there are variances, so that Frei et al. classified tutoring/mentoring into: groups, small groups, one-to-one, peer mentoring, and mixed (a mixture of other classifications). In groups, students have a similar professional profile, the professional is qualified, but does not necessarily occupy a prominent position in his career; small groups have up to eight apprentices, with more satisfactory results when the team is cohesive and those involved already know each other. One-to-one tutoring or "dyadic mentoring" requires a renowned specialist and simultaneously advances the learner's evolution. In peer mentoring, veteran students advise students at the beginning of the course, a priori, they have smaller power discrepancies, which provides personality⁽⁷⁾.

This peer mentoring model was described as "student pairs" by Akinla et al., who demonstrated that this form of mentoring allows for a facilitation of commitment to professional growth as the mentor helps their colleagues. In this way, the teacher only serves as a facilitator of the process, as a commentator⁽⁸⁾. This would be a third option for remodeling our program, but it has not yet been implemented due to the short period of activity and the context of the new coronavirus pandemic.

In the same panorama, there is e-Mentoring, virtual tutoring, which was already a trendy reality, with positive evaluations by both parties involved, mainly due to the lesser expenditure of time and which at this moment tends to gain prominence. It must be taken into account that digital learning has led to the deterioration of students' mental health, intensified by the context of the pandemic and social isolation experienced in 2020, causing disorders such as acute stress, emotional stress, irritability, insomnia, and mood disorders.

The study by Zis et al. showed that digital learning in medical studies can bring significant risks to students, as it deteriorates not only mental health but also increases levels of cynicism, impacting professional training. HEIs must be aware of the harmful effects on students to weigh the risks in implementing digital education. Therefore, and due to the stress factors inherent to health courses, medical schools must offer easily accessible mental health services⁽⁶⁾. In this sense, mentoring can be a prevention strategy and enabler of training, even if virtual, as it is possible at this time due to the recommended isolation measures, thus supporting a space for reflection and elaboration of the adversities experienced. In our experience, the Program will initially be offered virtually for the first year of graduation, with the aim of integrating the student into the academic environment.

The Mentoring environment must be safe and allow the development of trusting relationships for a frank exchange of ideas between the professional and the student. Mentoring has an

intertwined nature so that the success of this exchange depends on the efforts not only of the student but also of the mentor, the entire organization of the Program, and the Institution⁽⁹⁾.

The mentor of a group is a professional trained and qualified to do so, acting without authoritarianism. The mentor does not perform the role of evaluator, influences the formation of the apprentice's professional identity, by encouraging critical intelligence, independence, and reflection, and must also offer personal support⁽⁹⁾. The limited number of prepared mentors still represents a limitation and a challenge. This preparation concerns the desire to be together and to transmit their experiences to the students, as well as "offering themselves" to the demands that emerge in the group, in an inter-relational way.

The review by Sng et al. showed that one-fifth of mentoring relationships are broken each year, and this can be attributed to the difficulty of mentoring programs in taking a broad holistic perspective on relationships and not addressing professional and psychosocial factors together. Furthermore, the mentoring programs lack of the wisdom to access the student's capabilities, values, beliefs, and objectives and effectively take advantage of the available resources so that their needs are met⁽⁹⁾.

In relation to other limitations, according to Jackson et al., for mentoring to be a more fruitful experience, "the right chemistry" is necessary, and the apprentice must seek a mentor with greater compatibility and identification, however, when starting the project at the Institution, this attribute was not considered, with the groups being determined randomly by the secretariat, without considering the interests of the parties. It is worth mentioning that for the second phase of the Program, this item has been modified⁽¹⁰⁾.

The Institution, in turn, must provide the support and tools necessary to fulfill the program, which could take the form of protected time in the curriculum to perform the mentoring work⁽⁴⁾. As a student-centered activity that aims to benefit him, his commitment and proactivity is a fundamental piece, with some authors stating that the Program deserves, and should, receive the same level of importance as other curricular activities^(3,9,10).

Thus, it is understood that to better understand the practice of mentoring it is necessary to develop more robust and specific methods to study all approaches to this practice. Furthermore, the role of the Institution in this activity and the impression of teachers regarding the method must be studied, factors neglected in many studies^(3,9,10).

Bellodi PL et.al consider that mentors' satisfaction is directly related to student involvement. In a way, when he has someone as an authority, to whom they can satisfy, they tend to achieve more of the pre-established goal, but this does not mean involvement with the process⁽³⁾.

Regarding the evaluation of the Program, a difficulty encountered is in the measurement of certain skills and the fact that the studies do not measure the knowledge acquired or the new skills provided by mentoring, such as confidence and commitment. In this context, it is necessary to perform longitudinal studies, even during professional development, to analyze the long-term persistence of the benefits acquired in the activity. However, this is a challenge as it is costly and difficult to achieve⁽⁹⁾.

CONCLUSION

The success of the tutor-apprentice (or mentor-student) relationship and, consequently, of the tutoring program (or mentoring) requires active participation from both parties, in an environment of equality, freedom, and responsibility, in a partnership of reciprocal learning and development. In addition to the relationship, the way the Program is organized such as the mentoring environment, the mentor's profile, and institutional support are important conditions to be considered for the Program to be an effective support tool for those involved in this process.

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