

MENTORS AS LEARNERS: SOCIAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT IN REVERSE MENTORING

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Abstract

Reverse mentoring is increasingly recognized as a mentoring model that promotes reciprocal learning and intergenerational knowledge exchange. This study explores the development of mentors' social competencies within reverse mentoring using a qualitative research approach grounded in social constructivism. Data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed that reverse mentoring contributes to the development of communication, empathy, self-awareness, active listening, and conflict resolution skills. The findings also highlight the importance of trust-based relationships, open communication, adaptability, and mutual respect in supporting both professional interaction and personal growth. Overall, the study positions reverse mentoring as a meaningful context for the development of mentors' social competencies in contemporary professional environments.

Keywords: *Reverse mentoring, social competencies, mentor development, intergenerational learning.*

1. Introduction

Rapid transformations in professional and learning environments have reshaped the understanding of mentoring from a traditionally hierarchical relationship into a dynamic process of reciprocal learning and collaboration. Contemporary mentoring practices increasingly emphasize interpersonal interaction, mutual trust, empathy, and communication as central conditions for meaningful professional development (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Within this shifting perspective, mentors are no longer viewed solely as knowledge providers but also as active learners whose ability to establish constructive relationships depends largely on their social competencies. Skills such as active listening, empathy, self-awareness, communication, and conflict resolution play a significant role in creating trust-based mentoring relationships and sustaining effective learning processes. This study aims to explore how mentors' social competencies develop within reverse mentoring relationships and to identify the role of intergenerational learning in shaping professional interaction and personal development.

2. Theoretical framework

Mentoring and social competencies are closely interconnected within contemporary collaborative mentoring models, particularly reverse mentoring.

2.1. The concept of mentoring

Mentoring is commonly understood as a developmental relationship in which a more experienced individual supports the personal and professional growth of a less experienced person through guidance, knowledge sharing, and interpersonal support (Kram, 1985). Originating from Homer's *Odyssey*, mentoring symbolizes wisdom, trust, and guidance within learning relationships and has evolved into a widely applied professional development practice across educational and organizational contexts. Contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize collaboration, mutual respect, trust, and reciprocal interaction rather than hierarchical knowledge transfer alone (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021).

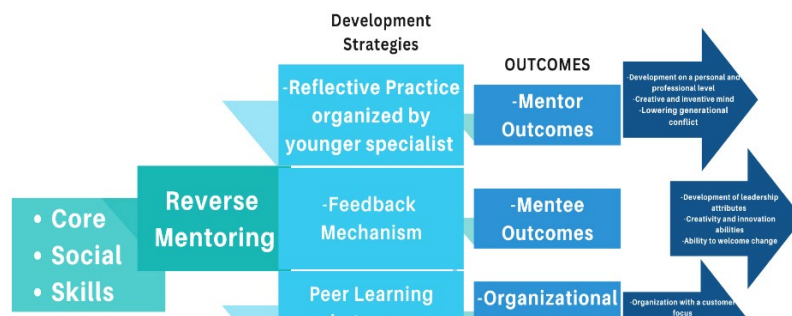
2.2. Social competencies in mentoring relationships

The quality and effectiveness of mentoring relationships largely depend on mentors' social competencies. Social competence refers to interpersonal abilities that enable individuals to communicate effectively, build trust-based relationships, and interact constructively within professional environments (Lopes et al., 2015). In mentoring contexts, competencies such as active listening, empathy, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution are important, as they support meaningful interaction and reciprocal learning processes (Ferris et al., 2018). Research suggests that mentors with strong social competencies are better able to build supportive relationships, encourage professional growth, and create psychologically safe learning environments. These competencies are especially important in reverse mentoring relationships, where interpersonal flexibility and mutual learning play a central role.

2.3. Reverse mentoring as a context for social competency development

Contemporary mentoring increasingly shifts toward collaborative and reciprocal learning models (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Reverse mentoring promotes intergenerational knowledge exchange and professional development by positioning younger or less experienced individuals as mentors to senior colleagues (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Morris, 2017). Initially associated with technological knowledge transfer, reverse mentoring is now viewed as a developmental practice supporting interpersonal learning and collaboration (O'Connor, 2022). Effective reverse mentoring relies on trust, communication, empathy, adaptability, and active listening (Ferris et al., 2018). Research suggests that reverse mentoring strengthens leadership development and intergenerational collaboration, although generational differences and power dynamics may complicate the process (Kaše et al., 2018). Despite growing scholarly attention, limited research has examined the development of mentors' social competencies within reverse mentoring relationships. The main dimensions and outcomes of reverse mentoring are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Development of Mentors' Social Competencies in the Process of Reverse Mentoring.



Note. Based on Clutterbuck (2011), Ferris et al. (2018), Kaše et al. (2018).

Reverse mentoring is a reciprocal learning process that supports the development of mentors' social competencies through reflection, feedback, and peer learning (Figure 1). This process contributes to leadership development, intergenerational collaboration, adaptability, and more inclusive professional relationships, while also supporting organizational innovation and mutual growth. Thus, reverse mentoring represents a meaningful context for strengthening mentors' social competencies and promoting collaborative professional development in contemporary learning environments.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in social constructivism to explore the development of mentors' social competencies in reverse mentoring (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using four thematic blocks and twelve open-ended questions related to mentoring experience, reverse mentoring practices, mentoring competencies, and social competency development (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). This approach encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and supported deeper exploration of emerging themes.

Research participants. Research participants. The study involved 12 participants from Lithuania and Azerbaijan working in the field of education, including teachers, mentors, and educational professionals with mentoring and reverse mentoring experience. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research aim (Flick, 2009). Selection criteria included mentoring experience, engagement in intergenerational learning practices, and the ability to reflect on personal and professional experiences. Data were collected in 2025 through recorded online and face-to-face interviews.

Data analysis. Collected data were transcribed and analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). The analysis involved repeated reading of interview transcripts, coding meaningful units, developing subcategories and categories, and interpreting emerging themes. The focus of the analysis was the development of social competencies within reverse mentoring relationships. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the interviews. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the transcripts and coding process were reviewed by two independent researchers.

Ethics. Ethical principles were ensured throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent and were informed about the research purpose, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. To ensure anonymity, participants were coded from R1 to R12. All collected data were used solely for research purposes.

4. Results

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). The findings highlighted the importance of interpersonal interaction, reciprocal learning, adaptability, and intergenerational collaboration in the mentoring process. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: “Mentoring as a Reciprocal Learning Relationship”; “Development of Social Competencies in Reverse Mentoring” and “Professional Growth and Challenges in Reverse Mentoring”.

The first theme “Mentoring as a reciprocal learning relationship” has been created based on the following 2 main categories, explaining the context: *Interpersonal competencies* and *Mentoring relationship experiences*. Each category also includes sub-categories, and they are represented in the 1 table below.

Table 1. Manifestation of the subcategories and categories of the theme “Mentoring as a reciprocal learning relationship”.

Mentoring as a reciprocal learning relationship			
Interpersonal competencies		Mentoring relationship experiences	
Personal and professional growth	Mutual learning	Trust-based relationships	Constructive Feedback
“I was very inspired when I was appointed as a mentor. I understood that I must learn many things” (LM7); “I must think how to meet my mentee’s needs” (LM8).	“Our relationship was mutually beneficial” (AM1); “Not only did she help me, but I also helped her” (AM1).	“I could approach her, ask, learn about everything. She would always have been happy to help me” (AM1); “We started working as a tandem” (LM11).	“Mentors must try to leave feedback as constructive as possible” (AM2). “Constructive feedback and clear explanations support improvement” (AM2).

Regarding mentoring as a reciprocal learning relationship, participants emphasized the importance of interpersonal competencies, mutual learning, and trust-based interaction in reverse mentoring. The findings suggest that mentoring relationships support personal and professional growth through continuous learning and responsiveness to mentees’ needs. As one participant stated, “I was very inspired when I was appointed as a mentor. I understood that I must learn many things” (LM7), while another noted that “I must think how to meet my mentee’s needs” (LM8). Reverse mentoring was described as a mutually beneficial process in which both participants exchange knowledge and support: “Our relationship was mutually beneficial” (AM1); “Not only did she help me, but I also helped her” (AM1). Participants further highlighted the significance of trust and constructive feedback in fostering collaboration and learning. One participant noted, “We started working as a tandem” (LM11), while another emphasized that “Mentors must try to leave feedback as constructive as possible” (AM2).

The second theme “*Development of social competencies in reverse mentoring*” has been created based on the following 2 main categories as well: *Interpersonal competencies* and *Emotional and adaptive competencies*. Each category also includes sub-categories, and they are represented in the 2 table below.

Table 2. Manifestation of the subcategories and categories of the theme
“Development of social competencies in reverse mentoring”.

Development of social competencies in reverse mentoring			
Interpersonal competencies		Emotional and adaptive competencies	
Communication skills	Active listening and feedback	Empathy and emotional awareness	Open-mindedness and adaptability
“Reverse mentoring requires a certain set of skills from mentors, including adaptability, openness to new concepts, and advanced communication” (AM1); “A mentor must be able to convey information clearly, as well as actively listen and ask questions to better understand” (AM2).	Communication training improves active listening skills and the ability to convey information correctly” (AM2); “Constructive feedback is important for effective interaction” (AM2).	“A mentor must possess empathy—the ability to understand the feelings and needs of the mentee” (AM1); “Self-awareness means understanding your own strengths and weaknesses” (AM1).	“You have to be open-minded and willing to learn something new from mentees as well” (AM2); “The learning process may not always be linear, and it is important to adapt teaching methods” (AM2).

Regarding emotional and adaptive competencies, participants emphasized empathy, self-awareness, openness to learning, and adaptability in reverse mentoring relationships. These competencies were associated with understanding mentees’ needs, effective communication, and supportive learning environments. As one participant stated, “A mentor must possess empathy - the ability to understand the feelings and needs of the mentee” (AM1), while another noted that “Self-awareness means understanding your own strengths and weaknesses” (AM1). Participants also highlighted the importance of openness and flexibility in reciprocal learning processes. One participant explained that “You have to be open-minded and willing to learn something new from mentees as well” (AM2), whereas another stated that “The learning process may not always be linear, and it is important to adapt teaching methods” (AM2).

The third theme is “Professional growth and challenges in reverse mentoring”, which is divided into 2 categories: *Developmental outcomes* and *Challenges in reverse mentoring* (See 3 table)

Table 3. Manifestation of the subcategories and categories of the theme
“Development of social competencies in reverse mentoring”.

Professional growth and challenges in reverse mentoring			
Interpersonal competencies		Challenges in reverse mentoring	
Professional and leadership growth	Mutual learning and collaboration	Intergenerational dynamics	Role Challenges
“To get new insights, to learn new things” (AM1); “They must have a better leadership skills” (AM2).	Our relationship was mutually beneficial” (AM1); “When I shared, I also gained knowledge” (AM2).	“People of Gen Z... could be a bit stubborn” (AM2); “Gen Z wants to have equal words” (AM2. and weaknesses” (AM1).	“It might be really hard to accept the fact that you can learn from someone less experienced” (AM2).

Regarding professional growth in reverse mentoring, participants emphasized continuous learning, leadership development, and mutual knowledge exchange. As one participant stated, “To get new insights, to learn new things” (AM1), while another noted that mentors “must have a better leadership skills” (AM2). Reverse mentoring was also described as a mutually beneficial process in which “When I shared, I also gained knowledge” (AM2). Participants also identified challenges related to intergenerational differences and role expectations. One participant noted that “People of Gen Z... could be a bit stubborn” (AM2), while another emphasized that “Gen Z wants to have equal words” (AM2). Role-related difficulties were reflected in the statement that “It might be really hard to accept the fact that you can learn from someone less experienced” (AM2).

5. The finalizing

Reverse mentoring emerges as a meaningful context for the development of mentors’ social competencies. Reciprocal learning, intergenerational collaboration, and trust-based interaction strengthen communication, empathy, adaptability, and professional growth. At the same time, generational dynamics and role-related challenges highlight the complexity of mentoring relationships in contemporary professional environments.

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