Reflections on Youth Mentorship

The Bahá'í community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working with thousands of youth of all ages and backgrounds to develop their talents and capacities is a central feature of our contribution to this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the nature and process of mentorship, and this paper represents an initial effort to discuss some of these insights as a contribution to the broader discourse on the role of youth in society.

Introduction

Among those who are working with young people, there is an increasingly dynamic conversation about the nature and process of mentorship. As they strive to support youth in their communities, organizations and youth workers often come to realize that young people benefit from close support and encouragement. Efforts are made to foster a trusting relationship between mentor and mentee, helping the youth to grow in confidence, skills, and abilities. These kinds of interactions have been shown to positively influence young people in a variety of ways, including improving their academic success and their employment prospects.

The concept of mentorship has broad relevance. All young people need the close support of one or more people with greater experience than their own who can assist them to navigate the transition towards maturity and adulthood. This document briefly explores three interrelated aspects of mentorship: (1) the relationship between mentor and mentee, (2) success in mentorship, and (3) locating mentorship in broader contexts.

The mentoring relationship

At the beginning of a mentoring relationship, both mentor and mentee sometimes struggle to figure out how they should interact. It is a relationship with its own characteristics – different from that of a teacher to a student, or a parent to a child. It can be seen as a friendship between two people, one who has more life experience than the other but both of whom are eager to learn. A healthy mentoring relationship, therefore, is characterized by the sincere desire to see one another progress and taking joy in the accomplishments of each other. It requires not only words of encouragement, but rather, real time spent together and the assurance of practical assistance with steps that are being taken into a new arena of life. And, while valuing the strengths and capacities of one another, it's important to avoid giving empty praise that only bolsters the ego.

Attention is also paid by mentors to the role of power in the relationship. Naturally, this implies that mentors take care to avoid dominating or manipulating a mentee. Mentees are never seen as "projects" or as the means to some other end. If the relationship becomes characterized as a friendship, it can become a mutually empowering relationship, where both mentor and mentee are learning alongside each other to enrich their lives.

It is worth considering how mentorship goes beyond simply transmitting information and sharing skills: How can the relationship between mentor and mentee be characterized by learning together? What qualities and attitudes distinguish an effective mentor?

Successful mentoring

How do we know if a mentoring relationship has "succeeded"? Working alongside someone with more experience should eventually develop in the mentee the courage to take their own steps forward. At some point, a young person's capacity develops to the point that they can act independently. However, our measure of success is more than just starting a new job, or achieving a few initial goals. One of the most significant indicators of success occurs when a mentee subsequently arises to accompany others.

Organizations involved in this work, therefore, naturally consider how to foster a thriving culture in which friends accompany one another. To foster this kind of culture involves raising consciousness about the extent to which we all depend on one another. As an increasing number of people understand how their progress depends on the progress of others, and vice-versa, this culture is further strengthened. In this light, we can consider what some of the other features of this culture could be, and what steps can be taken in order to encourage the development of such a culture.

Locating mentorship in other contexts

As our perspective widens beyond the specific relationship between mentor and mentee, other questions come into focus. How does mentoring move beyond simply reproducing the status quo? What are some of the changes that need to take place in society, and how could youth mentoring contribute to these processes?

While the interactions between mentor and mentee are at the centre of mentoring, there is a great deal in the environment of a young person that influences their progress. Mentors often see the benefit of becoming familiar with other aspects of the life of a mentee, including the spaces in which he or she moves, such as their school, neighbourhood, workplace, etc. These spaces exert a powerful influence on the lives and choices of young people, and there is often a need to transform each of these spaces into more nurturing environments. In this context, the emergence of groups of young people who create systems of mutual support and peer mentoring can strengthen the resolve of young people to pursue their goals and aspirations in the face of various forces that seek to manipulate them. This naturally becomes an area of learning for mentors and youth mentoring organizations.

Ultimately, one's view of mentoring necessarily relates to one's conception of the role of young people in society. Our hopes and aspirations for young people extend beyond helping them to fit into a prescribed role in society, especially one that gives them few opportunities for future progress. We might also envision young people as capable of becoming protagonists of their own growth and development, and catalysts to transform their social circumstances. If we see them in this light, then mentorship would extend beyond learning to produce an attractive CV, how to do well at an interview, or developing entrepreneurial skills. It would also include helping them to reflect on the condition of society and their own potential to contribute constructively to its transformation.