Reverse Mentoring and Intergenerational Learning in Nursing

Bridging generational diversity

*Girija Madhavanprabhakaran,¹ Frincy Francis,¹ Leodoro J. Labragne²

Departments of ¹Maternal & Child Health and ²Fundamentals and Administration, College of Nursing, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

*Corresponding Author e-mail: girija@squ.edu.om; girija16964@gmail.com

Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic urged technical competency and knowledge sharing among the diverse multigenerational workforce. Reverse mentoring is where a technically competent younger employee mentors the senior experienced employee and reciprocally exchanges the work culture and soft skills. Diverse intergenerational learning spurs innovation through sharing knowledge, skills, competencies, norms, and values. The ever-changing nursing practice and education with a multigenerational workforce demand a reverse mentoring approach for intergenerational knowledge sharing to enhance technical competency. Reverse mentoring is known to have benefits on quality of education, better practice outcomes, and employee development. A reverse mentoring strategy is proposed as a sustainable cost-effective intergenerational knowledge-sharing tool in the current era of economic crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper aimed to discuss the scope of reverse mentoring and intergenerational learning in nursing. This paper provides an overview of reverse mentoring characteristics, significance, benefits, conceptual framework, implementation strategy, and application in nursing.

Keywords: Mentoring; Covid-19; Cultural Diversity; Learning; Nursing; Preceptorship; Intergenerational learning; Multigenerational Workforce.
Introduction

The key challenge faced during Covid-19 pandemic was knowledge sharing among a multigenerational diverse workforce. As generations differ in their work ethic, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and communication styles, it is a challenge for the organizations to achieve their visions through collaborative teamwork and pose barriers to intergenerational learning.\(^1\) Reverse mentoring (RM) is a cross-generational approach that allows talented and willing young employees assigned as mentors to an older senior employee, supported by the organizational vision to bridge the technology divide between the two generations and to develop future leaders.\(^2\) Overcoming challenges of intergenerational learning through a reverse mentoring approach would be a choice and a strategy for the nursing profession both in practice and academia.

It is well documented that the intergenerational learning program provides opportunities for the transfer of knowledge, skills, competencies wisdom, norms, and values between generations and provides lifelong learning and sharing between generations.\(^3\) Reverse mentoring strategy is an opportunity for intergenerational knowledge sharing and thus developing and enhancing intergenerational team spirit.\(^4\) In today’s digital age, reverse mentoring is an important tool to develop talent and promote unity between different generations. By bringing generations together through reverse mentoring, the younger employee develops professional relationships with leaders, and exchanges skills, knowledge, and attitudes to become empowered emerging leaders for the future. With a public policy of lockdowns and physical distancing along with the global economic crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic period, all organizations can facilitate the cost-effective reverse mentoring approach to build a technically competent workforce. This paper aimed to discuss the scope of the reverse mentoring approach for intergenerational learning in nursing practice and academia. This paper provides an overview of reverse mentoring characteristics, significance, benefits, conceptual framework, implementation strategy, and application in nursing.

**Significance of Reverse Mentoring**

Demographic shifts in the workforce are inevitable. The 2019 Deloitte Millennial Survey reports that, globally in the near future, Millennials will make up 75% of the workforce, most Baby
Boomers will retire, and the number of Generation Xers will reduce. In the current era of diverse staff, RM is proposed to be a tool for developing an engaged and committed multigenerational workforce and it bridges the generational gap. Kwoh in her work “Reverse Mentoring Cracks Workplace”, highlights the importance of Millennials in an organization, as they often bring new, innovative ideas and skills to the table, they are tech-savvy, racially diverse, socially well-connected, and collaborative by nature. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, typically bring experience, best practices, and a long history of good work ethic to the table. Interacting with people from different generations brings out the best, as it helps each other to realize the worth of diverse perspectives and ignites to think innovatively and creatively. A new way of working such as remote working, teleworking, and flexible working enabled by high technology gained significance in the light of the Covid 19 pandemic. With global lockdown and physical distancing, a reverse mentoring approach within organizations would be a choice to facilitate intergenerational learning among a diverse staff.

The global nursing workforce comprises three different generations with differences in professional backgrounds, ideologies, beliefs, work practices, and attitudes. The three generations based on their year of birth, the Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964), Generation X (1965 to 1980), and the Millennials or Generations Y (1981 to 2000) created a significant diversity among the current workforce. Statistics show that, out of over 3.1 million nurses, 50.2% are Baby Boomers, 30.4% are Generation Xers and 19.4% are Millennials. A strength and weakness analysis among these three categories shows major differences, where 73% of workers agreed that Baby Boomers are hardworking but lack technical skills, GenXers are good relationship builders and revenue generators, and Millennials are enthusiastic learners with technical and social-media skills as assets. Understanding the different categories of nurses and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses can facilitate a well-planned initiation of a reverse-monitoring program in an organization that enhance healthcare quality and improve patient safety. Intergenerational communication and interaction with priority to health and wellbeing, create opportunities for positive intergenerational interactions between generations thus it reduces the gap between diverse generations. As online teaching-learning activities are the iconic method during this pandemic period of Covid 19, the reverse mentoring approach and intergenerational learning are significant means to empower diverse faculty. Research findings revealed that reverse mentoring is an efficient tool for sharing knowledge by creative involvement, leadership
development, and the development of intergenerational relationships based on mutual
acceptance.¹²

The increasing worldwide diversity in nurses and nursing faculties demands this
intergenerational mentoring, both in practice and nursing education. With the global economic
crisis due to Covid-19, organizations can facilitate a cost-effective reverse mentoring approach to
build a technically competent workforce. The need to rethink new ways of mentoring strategies
to promote knowledge and skill transfer and overcome challenges of the current pandemic
situation by enhancing the technical competency of a diversified workforce both in nursing
practice and academia is of high priority. Although previous studies report that organizations
promote generational diversity as it guarantees team spirit and performance, it creates challenges
in knowledge transfer.¹³ Despite the advantages of reverse mentoring limited adoption of this
reciprocal mentoring is reported, indicating the need to have more efforts to promote the reverse
mentoring approach for intergenerational learning among diverse generations in modern
organizations.⁸

**Essential Characteristics of Reverse Mentoring**

Mentoring is a best-practice leadership-development program, through which employers hope to
inculcate commitment in employees by treating them as unique resources for competitive
advantage.¹⁴ Satterly, Cullen, and Dyson developed a model of intergenerational mentoring
model and recommended a reverse-mentoring model that considered the age and experience of
the faculty.¹⁵ This intergenerational mentoring model acknowledges the skills each generation
brings to the academic environment and is based on the slogan “Everyone leads; everyone
learns”. Reverse mentoring ensures continuous organizational learning by meeting specific needs
in a collective and efficient way by creating role models and offering carrier-related and
psychological support, along with target-oriented education ensuring career development for
leaders and the success of both individuals and organizations.²¹⁶ Interpersonal comfort, trust and
mutual respect between employees and employers is emphasized.

The main features of the reverse-mentoring process are its innovative non-hierarchical approach,
novice mentor, and bidirectional relationship. Compartmentalized mentoring on new skills such
as the latest applications, informatics, podcasts, e-learning, and electronic databases are focused. It also ensures continuous organizational learning with respect to cultural differences by meeting specific identified needs in a collective and efficient manner. The success of reverse mentoring depends on the degree of mentor/mentee relationship, their level of engagement, the type and amount of organizational support, especially the engagement of higher officers, and conducive organizational culture are the main organizational support needed for the successful accomplishment of reverse mentoring. Clarke et al recommended certain essential attributes and behaviors for both mentees and mentors to ensure successful reverse mentoring (Table 1).

Theoretical Base and Conceptual Framework of Reverse Mentoring

Satterly, Cullen, and Dyson developed an intergenerational mentoring model and recommended a reverse-mentoring model that considered the age and experience of the faculty. Reverse mentoring is being outlined using various theories and the use of theoretical frameworks in RM continues to expand as more and more intergenerational learning strategies are made into practice. Reverse mentoring is more rooted in social and learning theories. This paper focuses on the adult-learning (andragogy) and social theoretical bases to relate the concepts in reverse mentoring.

Learning through the intergenerational mentoring model is based on the adult learning theory by Knowles as it identifies all key elements, including a learner’s need to know, self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation. When exploring the theoretical support for reverse mentoring, Zauschner-Studnicka related adult learning theory to reverse mentoring from an educational perspective. Reverse mentoring meets the adult developmental needs of both the mentee and mentor. Adult learners obtain new knowledge first through understanding, then through application at work, where they examine their work, synthesize new answers to solve problems, and evaluate various strategies and solutions to benefit the organization and themselves.

Social theories consider mentors as role models. Promoting technical competence and knowledge sharing, networking, and exchanging information are the key features of RM. Reverse mentoring has been used traditionally as a social exchange tool to leverage the expertise of generations.
Many studies have used social exchange theory and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as a theoretical framework. Mentoring has been related to social exchange theory due to its focus on dyadic relationships, reciprocity, and the relationship that develops as an important element for individuals’ growth in their careers. Social exchange theory has been extended into the leadership domain, with leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. Leader-member exchange is goal-directed intergenerational learning focusing on the innovative technological advancement of seniors by pairing with expert juniors, which also paves the milieu to facilitate emotional intimacy and socializing with the younger generation. The conceptual framework of reverse mentoring is illustrated in the figure.

Overview and Outcomes of Reverse Mentoring
The essential attributes of the mentee, mentor, mentoring relationship characteristics and functions, organizational goals, and the outcomes are presented in Figure 2. Figure 2 is a replica of a brief overview of what is happening in reverse mentoring. The mentor-mentee attributes explain in a glimpse what characteristics or contributions the mentor and mentee have and the outcome they receive with the reverse mentoring process. Also, the figure reflects the functions that go into the process along with the characteristics of the relationship between the mentee and mentor. The benefit for the organization such as sustainable healthy work culture with job satisfaction contributing to low attrition and good outcomes are also portrayed in the figure.

Implementation strategy for reverse mentoring
Introducing reverse mentoring in an organization can be considered either as a standalone mentoring program or as part of existing mentoring initiatives. The perceived organizational support (POS) and the leader-member exchange (LMX) are the two social exchange mechanisms explained by Choudhuri & Gosh. Perceived organizational support ensures the collaboration between employees and the organization, and will foster employee morale by making them feel valued for their contributions. Leader-member exchange: inter-generational exchange emphasizes inter-generational exchange, where seniors are paired with juniors to achieve a predetermined goal related to current technological advancements. Such pairings facilitate emotional intimacy and
socializing with the younger generation. There is no one-size-fits-all reverse mentoring program as each organization has to feel authentic to workplace culture and generation gap.\textsuperscript{21} It is advisable that each institution embrace the concept of reverse mentoring and foster it wherever possible.

**Steps to implement an effective reverse mentoring program in an organization**

The aim of reverse mentoring should focus on specific organizational visions and goals. Appropriate pairing, clear goals, and set guidelines are crucial factors for reverse mentoring. Organizations should plan and initiate reverse-mentoring programs meticulously and in a sequential way. Figure 3 shows the process of implementing reverse mentoring in an organization.

At first, a thorough initial assessment of the setting, nature of employees, and the organizational vision and mission are the fundamentals for identifying and setting objectives based on the needs and skills in initiating the reverse-mentoring program. Always benchmark with organizations practicing reverse mentoring. The next important step is finding professional paring with an appropriately matched mentor and mentee on basis of identified needs and skills. Effective mentoring is based on the chemistry of the partners. Right pairing is important and mostly based on a passion to share and commitment. Then implementing the plan of the intergenerational model of reverse mentoring with administrative support. The key step to consider for effective implementation is to develop a reverse-mentoring agreement. This step calls to define specific reasons for mentoring and develop mentoring goals and plans. Specific policies and protocols act as frameworks to be followed. At this stage, both the mentee and mentor must agree on the rules and regulations. A written agreement must be agreed upon by both parties. After this agreement, the next step is to consider the negotiation of agreements. RM calls for rules but, embraces a workplace flexibility culture to facilitate new learning. Execution and practice by the mentee for a contract period is the next step. The mentor must ensure that the mentee practices the new concepts and tools. Establish ongoing feedback to evaluate their progress continuously based on agreed objectives as the next step. This will be followed by the analysis of the reverse mentoring program for its impact and feasibility. Based on the analysis plan either continue the same plan or modify and restructure it to suit the organizational need and implement new plans.\textsuperscript{18,21}
Reverse mentoring and intergenerational learning in nursing

Medical, nursing and all allied medical professions are dynamically advancing. This diverse set of professionals needs constant and continual education regarding rapid technological development. The advances in technology have a tremendous impact, both in practice and in academia, which necessitates reverse mentoring to ensure seniors with new technological competency in a cost-effective and convenient way.

Most hospital units have diverse nursing populations ranging from traditionalists, baby boomers, and Gen X and Gen Y/Millennials. They come with their own sets of skills and values. Hence it is essential for nurse managers to support and appreciate intergenerational learning in nursing units. Quoting an example from a 28 bedded oncology clinical unit. The unit had recently implemented the latest method of charting patient details which is completely computerized. In all the unit had 21 registered nurses who were equally distributed in the category of baby boomers, Gen X, and Millennials. The Millennials, having strong skills to handle computers were recruited to support the rest of the team members while the new charting system got implemented. Eventually, the Millennials known as the “Super Users” fell into the mentoring role thus offering full support in slowly transitioning the nurses belonging to the baby boomers and the Gen X. As verbalized by the Millennials the new mentoring role made them feel valued and developed a cohesiveness into the team while the senior nurses learned the charting system with their help. Thus reverse mentoring is instrumental in creating a synergistic work environment for all. A similar but unique kind of reverse mentoring program among healthcare workers was trialed in the St. Thomas’ and Grey’s NHS Foundation trust in 2018 known as Reverse Mentoring for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (ReMEDI). Here a senior white staff was the mentee and the junior staff from the Black and Minority Ethnic(BME) was the mentor. The program was unfurled to enhance openness, understand the cultural differences and minimize discrimination. The mentee often held an administrative position and this ReMEDI allowed exploring the subject’s equality, diversity, and inclusion practices at individual, departmental, organizational, and symbolic levels.

The review aimed to investigate the benefits of the intergenerational program for children and older adults and its application in the health care system by Aemmi, et al concluded that
intergenerational learning provided the best resources for the social and emotional growth of children and older adults and they recommended that intergenerational learning approach can be used for nursing care, education and follow-up in health care systems especially by nurses. The impact of intergenerational learning among young people and older adults during Covid 19 was explored in China. The main focus of intergenerational sharing was on pandemic prevention, health and fitness, traditional culture, and information literacy. They reported that both generations shared and gained more knowledge on health, life skills, and values, the older generation become more perspective in their learning and behaviors, younger generation cultivated the concept of lifelong learning and closer relationship.24

Initiating reverse mentoring is a simpler, more low-cost way to bridge the learning gap than investing in training and development. This cross-generational training can be achieved by maintaining the traditional mentor-mentee pairing. Each organization can embrace the reverse-mentoring concept as complementary to traditional mentoring to enhance workplace relationships. Pairing and collaboration on projects and research interconnect them in organizational, global, academic, and social perspectives.

The ever-changing academic environment demands that diverse nursing faculty are in need of mentoring for new technology use in education. The familiarity of the current generation with informatics, along with their skills in handling innovative technology are important factors for their social interconnection and collaboration, while senior faculty can pass on work ethic and best practices to junior mentors, RM help to address academic generation gaps. Thus, in light of the knowledge and experience of Millennials on technology and innovative approaches to teaching, the use of reverse mentoring would be advantageous for senior nursing faculty to effectively meet the learning needs of the current generations of students who are on the online platform. Considering the intergenerational faculty workforce, three steps must be carried out for reverse mentoring: (1) assessing the needs and skillsets of faculty, (2) grouping and matching faculty based on their needs and skills, (3) implementing intergenerational faculty mentoring. The diversity of academic departments in their size and structure does not allow a specific model to be adopted on a unilateral basis; rather, it calls for varying models of reverse mentoring in
each department to cater to specific needs. The goal of intergenerational mentoring is to enhance learning and knowledge sharing among multigenerational participants.

In higher education sector is with trends of intergenerational population both in terms of faculty and students. The twenty first century with the novice Millennials, Gen Xers and boomers as faculty demand intergenerational collaboration through reverse mentoring models without a hierarchical framework. As everyone is considered with potential to learn and lead, this innovative knowledge sharing within educational and practice area contribute to enhancing each one’s essential skills and boost self-esteem contributing to organizational goals and mission. The reverse mentoring and educational interconnections are inevitable as the faculty development in view of teaching-learning, scholarship, and services are enhanced through intergenerational collaboration.

Reverse mentoring can be very useful in nurse education. For example, Quality and Safety Education in Nursing (QSEN) recommends informatics and teamwork as core competencies of student learning outcomes. Older faculties would find it difficult to keep up with new technologies such as e-learning modules, apps, online forums, and electronic databases, whereas, Millennials are always at the forefront of advancing technology thus RM approach can bridge this gap between generations. Reverse mentoring reduces generational tension through creative discussion and fostering understanding by building trust, positive attitudes, and mutual respect; thus, reverse mentoring equips diverse faculties with the ability to serve young students with advanced skills in online education. Currently, all higher-education organizations must remain technological, challenging, and competitive and consider how to effectively manage their demographically diverse faculty who serve technically competent students. Though Boomers and the Millennials are the two fundamentally opposed workforce segments, reverse-mentoring programs allow them to excel in teaching-learning in online mode. The proper pairing, experience, and personality of a mentor are common challenges experienced in mentoring in medical academia. Therefore, appropriate planning, pairing, mentoring workshops, organizational guidelines, and a culture of support are essentials for smooth reverse mentoring.
Limitations

Although reverse mentoring is promising for the upward growth of an organization, its potential limitations could affect the initiation and acceptance of this approach. Cross-cultural differences could complicate smooth relationships. Communication is a key challenge among diverse employees, and encouraging an amicable and accepting mentality among generations would help to set aside their egos and enhance professional growth. A lack of confidence of young mentors in interacting with seniors, along with the power imbalance in pairing, could hinder smooth information exchange. However, through mutual respect, effective communication skills, professionalism, and reciprocity, along with effective organizational culture building and support, reverse mentoring can be implemented well and is the need of the hour to enhance intergenerational learning in the nursing field.

Conclusion

Reverse mentoring is the best practice for intergenerational learning and this bidirectional innovative approach will transform and empower a multi-generational diverse workforce. It reduces the digital divide among diverse faculty and practitioners with positive outcomes at the individual, departmental and organizational levels. Though sequential steps are recommended for RM implementation, each organization must tailor it to suit its specific needs while planning and implementing a reverse mentoring program. With the dynamic technological innovations, advancing health care and in the era of online and technology-based nursing education, the role of junior faculty as a mentor to senior faculty, augment intra and interdisciplinary collaboration in all aspects of service, education, research, and ensures better health care outcomes. Mutual respect, reciprocity, and effective communication reduce the potential limitations of RM.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely acknowledge Cambridge proofreading LLC for their editorial and proofreading services.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
**Funding**
No funding was received for this study.

**Authors’ Contribution**
All authors have contributed to this work from the conception of the idea till the review of the final edition of the manuscript. GM conceptualized the topic and prepared an initial draft of the manuscript. FF and LJJ made a substantial contribution to the design and preparation of the manuscript. All authors were involved in drafting and revising the manuscript for intelligent content. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

**References**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Expected Behaviours</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mentor</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mentee</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respects and acknowledges the expertise of the mentee</td>
<td>Shows respect for the skills of the mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledges the limitations of the mentee, who has extensive responsibilities</td>
<td>Articulates their needs clearly to the mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages joint learning objectives and ensures skill outcomes</td>
<td>May require practice and review to improve specific skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a comfortable learning environment</td>
<td>Affective-based learning, allowing changes in attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies the resources required to achieve set goals</td>
<td>Formulates objective-based activities to achieve goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for the mentee to assess their own needs and progress</td>
<td>Conducts periodic self-reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively listens to the needs of the mentee to improve cross-generational communication</td>
<td>Acknowledges areas for improvement and verbalizes them to their mentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of Reverse Mentoring**
Figure 2: Overview and Outcomes of Reverse Mentoring

Figure 3: Process of Implementing Reverse Mentoring