

# The Ethnic Mismatch in Mentor-Mentee Pairing and Its Impact on their Engagement: A Qualitative Study

BHARATHI SENGODAN<sup>1\*</sup>, P.K. RAJESH<sup>2</sup>, REMYA VALLATHOL<sup>3</sup>, PARTHIBAN GOVINDARAJOO<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST) University, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author: b.sengodan@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

The most powerful learning method is mentoring. Coaching as mentors help to fill gaps in knowledge and improve the mentee's decision-making. Any disruption in the process of mentor-mentee bonding can derail the learning process. Studies indicate that ethnicity is crucial to experience cross-cultural interactions in a mentor-mentee relationship, but empirical evidence is scant. This study intended to explore the factors or practices that empower or hamper mentor-mentee engagement in an ethnically matched and mismatched mentor-mentee pairing. In this study, twelve undergraduate medical students in the preclinical phase selected by purposive sampling of varying ethnicity participated in one-to-one interviews. An open and qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted to gather data for analysis and develop underlying themes impacting the mentorship relationship. The findings in this study reveal that mentees conceptualize the mentor-mentee engagement as supportive in factors including academic progress, in improving mental health with psychosocial help, and in guiding mentees in achieving goals and crossing hurdles. Notably, the study revealed a lapse in the supervision of portfolio writing in the curriculum, and the mentees have a low value attached to it. Mentees also prefer a peer mentor as they permit smooth engagement and relationships. Participants did not explicitly divulge any effect of ethnicity in the mentor-mentee relationship. However, subtle findings reveal that negative comments of the mentor-mentee engagement were by mentees paired with mentors of different ethnicities, and mentees who contributed to the firm positive comments were with similar ethnicity. In conclusion, the study reveals that mentor-mentee engagement is essential as it supports a mentee's academic progress, improves mental health, and guides them in achieving goals and crossing hurdles. The findings in this study align with previous literature describing the key benefits of mentoring. The study also reveals some reluctance on the mentee's part to actively participate in the mentor-mentee engagement on the perception that a peer is more approachable and better understands the problems of their generation. The other factors include mistrust by the mentee on the mentor's confidentiality and low value attached to the portfolio writing. Many studies reveal that ethnic variation in mentor-mentee pairing can affect their engagement. In this study, participants did not explicitly divulge any effect of ethnicity in the mentor-mentee relationship, nevertheless, subtle findings reveal that negative comments were from mentees with mentors of different ethnicities, and mentees who had mentors of similar ethnicity quoted firm positives. We could argue that it could have been a general effect, not related to ethnicity. Future observational research could provide more insights into how mentors approach their role and what mentees do in a mentor-mentee session, and how this affects learners' perceptions of the engagement.

**Keywords:** mentor-mentee engagement, mismatched ethnicity, mentor-mentee pairing, portfolio.