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Empowering teachers through mentoring within Language Teacher Associations: examples from Africa

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Introduction

Quality education continues to be at the centre of national and international policies because of its perceived role in breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing inequalities (United Nations, 2018). In Africa, like elsewhere in the Global South, discussions of quality education have centred around the need for quality teacher education and development (e.g. Akyeampong et al. 2007; UNESCO 2015), particularly in response to the demographic rise in school enrolments in recent years and the acute lack of educational resources (Kuchah, Djido and Taye 2019). In fact, studies that have examined the challenges to education on the continent (e.g., Focho 2018; Tembe 2006) suggest that the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) policy, at the dawn of the 21st century, led to a sharp increase in school enrolments without a concomitant increase in infrastructural and resource provision. As a result, over-crowded classrooms, lack of textbooks, low and inadequate resources and a general lack of formal in-service education programs are common themes in education and pedagogy in Africa (Shamim and Kuchah 2016). While these challenges affect all students and teachers in the school system, there is sufficient evidence of even more complex school and social barriers to female education on the continent. Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2006) for example, provide evidence from North Africa that the percentage of females over age 15 who are illiterate is more than double that of males. Findings from a recent study in Rwanda (Uworwabayeho et al. forthcoming) indicate significant gender differences in secondary school, with boys outperforming girls in English examinations nationwide. Low school completion rates for girls have also been recorded in 21 African countries (Male and Wodon 2018). This is further exacerbated by the near lack of female leadership in formal and non-formal educational organisations (Suen 2013; Mulkeen 2010) despite research evidence (e.g., from 10 Francophone African countries) that female teachers have a positive influence on girls' school achievements without affecting boys (Lee, Rhee and Rudolf 2019).

Within this dynamic, Africa has witnessed a rising demand for, and inclusion of, English in the school curriculum, especially in the traditional non-anglophone countries (Coleman 2013), despite existing challenges in teacher recruitment and retention which sometimes make it difficult for governments to focus on the professional development of state schoolteachers (Mtika and Gates 2011; UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2016). Where institutional support for teacher development has been provided, this is often top-down in nature with no systematic assessment of the training needs of teachers; Ministries of Education have tended to rely on external support from organisations that are detached from the realities of the context within which teachers live and work and, as such, offer models of teacher education that sometimes lack adjustment and adaptation to the needs of the local teachers (Areaya 2016). Our own experience of working with African teachers in various projects suggests that to better address the challenges outlined above, language education in Africa requires approaches to teacher education that are embedded in the sociocultural realities within which teachers work. This, we argue, can be achieved through mentoring that empowers teachers to investigate their classroom practices as well as supports more engagement of female teachers in language education leadership within the continent.

In this respect, a significant number of national language teacher associations (LTAs) have emerged in the continent in recent years and are partnering with each other (see Kuchah et al. 2018, for an overview) to identify shared needs and seek solutions to common challenges. This is particularly the case within Africa ELTA, founded in 2014 with 22 member associations (see https://africaelta.org/about). These LTAs are increasingly taking over some of the responsibilities of teacher education from Ministries of Education and are offering professional development opportunities that are less demanding and more accessible for teachers. At the heart of their initiatives is their potential to provide platforms for informal mentoring and contextually relevant teacher development initiatives that empower teachers beyond the confines of formal teacher education and the restrictions that some educational stakeholders may place to wield influence and impede individual teacher development efforts (Elsheikh, Effiong and Coombe 2018).

In this chapter, we focus on two teacher mentoring programs we have both initiated and developed within Africa ELTA - a teacher research mentoring project and a female leadership mentoring scheme – to address the needs and challenges highlighted above. This is with the view of showing how localizing mentoring practices and contextualizing teacher education efforts through LTAs

can enhance the potential of teachers and result in the development of thought leadership, which is essential for sustainable teacher development in less favourable contexts in Africa. To do this, we examine the processes, challenges, and opportunities for teacher mentoring in this context, showing the extent to which such initiatives are essential both for the professional development of teachers and for the generation and dissemination of contextually embedded pedagogic and professional ideas and practices. Drawing from these two teacher mentoring initiatives, we argue for the need for a participant-centred approach to professional development through localized mentoring.

Teacher mentoring in the African context: between global trends and local realities

Recent trends in thinking and research on mentoring have been framed around a socio-cultural view of teacher development which promotes mentor-mentee collaboration in 'co-construct[ing] their professional identities within a specific context' (Asención 2012) as well as the potential for mentoring to build capital and *habitus* in the context of mentees' work (Park et al. 2016). Gakonga (2019) explains that in this view of mentoring, the relationship between mentor and mentee is, at best, a reciprocal one. Yet, such reciprocity might be hampered by educational cultures where power differentials permeate mentor-mentee interactions and relationships. Traditionally, teacher mentoring in Africa has been based on a transmission model of teacher development. Underlying transmission-based approaches to mentoring in language education is the *craft model* (Wallace 1991) of teacher education which sees the 'expert' teacher as a model to be copied by the 'novice' teacher or trainee. Tenjoh-Okwen (1996) describes an example of how this model works in a Cameroonian context where trainee teachers are guided through demonstration lessons, often given by the mentor, and expected to replicate the same elaborate, step by step, rigid lesson plans in their own teaching. This model of mentoring, he argues, results in 'ritual teaching behaviour' (Maingay 1988), which trainees usually abandon as useless and time consuming once they graduate.

However, there is a growing shift towards a more reciprocal approach to mentoring which provides space for reflexivity between mentor and mentee and potentially plays a transformative role in teacher development. Examples of such an approach are illustrated in studies in South Africa. For example, Frick et al. (2010) examine a school-based mentoring programme which is framed around reflective practice and highlight the potential of mentoring to be a catalyst to enhance the

reflection essential for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Msila's (2015) study of a school leadership mentorship programme in South Africa found that effective mentoring of school leaders led to leadership practices that enhanced a culture of achievement, inspired a desire for ongoing professional development and enabled school leaders to forge healthy links with other stakeholders within the school community.

Central to the models of mentoring discussed above is the importance of aligning the mentoring focus to mentees' needs and expectations through an explicit philosophical orientation, a clear plan and set goals (Gagen and Bowie 2005). As Whitaker et al. (2007: 381) have suggested, teachers find professional development more effective when it is personally and professionally useful to their unique needs and challenges. In mentoring in-service teachers, however, an additional requirement for shaping a mentoring programme should be to build a collegial relationship between mentors and mentees to dissipate potential 'power asymmetry' between them (van Louw and Waghid, 2008).

The two mentoring projects described in this chapter illustrate how participants' expressed needs and the construction of mutual understandings of goals and support systems were built into the design and implementation processes. This enabled teachers to develop understandings and expertise around their areas of professional interest.

Insights

Teacher mentoring within African LTAs

Besides school-based mentoring projects, alternative mentoring spaces can have a huge impact on teachers' professional lives and work. These alternative mentoring spaces include those provided by language teacher associations (LTAs), which are increasingly recognised as agents of change (Adoniou 2017). Mentoring has been shown to be one form of teacher education within LTAs, mainly because LTA networking activities give teachers opportunities to challenge themselves in specific ways based on their specific context (Collet 2016; Niyibigira and Kwitonda 2021). However, the approach and process of mentoring teachers within LTAs require some adaptation to, and sometimes re-structuring of, existing models. This is even more the case in Africa where

institutions such as the British Council and the American Regional English Language Offices (RELOs) commit considerable resources and foreign expertise to support teacher development initiatives across the continent. This might mean that ideas and resources informing teacher development are generated primarily from other contexts, particularly the West (Banegas et al. forthcoming; Shamim and Kuchah 2016), neglecting the lived and professional experiences of local teachers and their learners.

However, collaborative teacher development initiatives, where teachers support each other in developing ideas and best practices, are emerging. Such collaborative initiatives often involve experienced and knowledgeable colleagues supporting each other and their novice colleagues in collegial networks. Examples include communities of practice in Rwanda (Niyibigira and Kwitonda 2021), pedagogic cells in Senegal (Kuchah et al. 2019), teacher research groups in Cameroon (Ekembe and Fonjong 2018), and national and regional LTAs such as Africa ELTA (Elsheikh and Effiong 2018). These support systems provide both systematic and informal mentoring opportunities that have been under-researched. In what follows, we share two examples of mentoring programs that we initiated and implemented within Africa ELTA - the teacher research and the female leadership mentoring programs - and reflect on the processes and outcomes.

The Africa ELTA teacher research mentoring project

Beginnings, processes and experiences

Since May 2017, the first author has been involved in forging relationships between Africa ELTA and existing international organisations in the field of TESOL, initially as Strategic Development Officer of the Association and later as Africa ELTA Adviser and President of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). Since then, Africa ELTA has partnered with three of IATEFL's Special Interest Groups (SIGs) in running two Pre-conference events (PCEs) at Africa ELTA annual conferences in Senegal and Nigeria in 2018 and 2019 respectively (see Kuchah et al. forthcoming, for details).

The teacher research project discussed in this section is the outcome of collaboration with the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group (ReSIG) during the 2019 Africa ELTA PCE in Abuja, Nigeria. The theme was *Teachers in Action: Exploring Global Issues through classroom research*.

This collaboration was particularly sought because of IATEFL ReSIG's previous experience in supporting an LTA research project in Cameroon (Kuchah 2015) and the involvement of some of its members in similar projects elsewhere in the Global South (e.g., Rebolledo et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2017). To ensure that the PCE reflected African classroom experiences, six of the seven speakers at the PCE were African teachers with experience of classroom research within the continent. The event consisted of a plenary presentation and six hands-on workshops, each addressing different aspects of classroom research and showcasing examples from the work of facilitators (see Kuchah et al. forthcoming for details). These examples served as input for a subsequent task requiring participants to identify specific challenges or puzzles in their own teaching as a basis for developing their own research plans. Building on previous local initiatives (Kuchah and Smith 2016; Ekembe and Fonjong 2018), we took an *enhancement approach* to teacher development (Kuchah 2013), which encouraged teachers to see themselves as experts of their context capable of developing inquiry-led understandings of contextually appropriate pedagogic practices. This approach informed the design of a program to provide mentoring for teachers to conduct classroom research in order to generate practical solutions to context-specific challenges.

Teachers from 12 African countries signed up to the teacher research mentoring group and because the mentoring project was going to be mainly virtual, we[1] insisted on participants subscribing to an email and WhatsApp group, and checking their emails at regular intervals. The email group served as the main channel of communication in order to preempt eventual challenges with communicating with their mentors; the WhatsApp group, which was more familiar to participants, served as a platform for socialization, setting expectations and reminders. A separate WhatsApp group was also created for both Africa ELTA and ReSIG volunteers to share experiences, discuss progress and challenges and share useful mentoring tips throughout the project.

To encourage participants to identify research ideas from their own classroom experiences, we invited them to write a 200–300-word piece, within a month, based on the following prompts:

[1] The two authors of this chapter coordinated the entire mentoring project and also mentored teacher researchers.

a) What is/are the major problem(s) you face in your teaching - what is problematic about this and why?

b) If you wanted to investigate this or other issues in your teaching, what would be your top three research questions? List them in order of importance.

Examples of classroom research projects (e.g., Smith et al. 2017) were also shared with participants to give them an idea of what teachers in similar challenging contexts were doing.

A total of 22 participants responded to the prompts and their responses were collated and shared with the group of mentors with the aim of helping the mentoring team identify patterns in research focus and facilitate the mentor-mentee matching process. Once the matching had been completed, mentors were included in the participants' WhatsApp group to 'socialise' with mentees and co-construct expectations, since the program allowed mentors the freedom to choose their work focus based on their mentee's needs, following Kennedy's (2005) approach to mentoring. Overall, mentors supported their mentees through the process of identifying and understanding issues in their classrooms, formulating their research questions, designing data collection tools, collecting, and interpreting data, changing and reflecting on practice where necessary and reporting their experience. The program was also supported by four interactive webinars, presented by ReSIG speakers, and attended by both mentors and mentees. These webinars addressed different stages in an exploratory action research process, including identifying and understanding a problem or puzzle, developing a research focus and questions, as well as different ways of collecting, analysing and interpreting data (see Kuchah et al., forthcoming, for details).

Reporting and reflecting on the mentorship program

As was stated earlier, the goal of mentoring within Africa ELTA is to nurture local expertise and enhance teachers' ability to generate and share contextually appropriate pedagogic practices. This goal was partly achieved during the Africa ELTA Online Symposium in 2020, with three teachers from the research group agreeing to be further mentored to present their research to an international audience. The goal of this additional mentoring was two-fold: first, to disseminate the work of mentees to inspire other African teachers to consider classroom research as part of their professional growth and hopefully join the next cycle of the research program and second, to support and showcase mentees' presentation skills and build their self-confidence as conference

speakers. This was important, since some mentees who had completed their research projects indicated they were still not confident in their public speaking skills. This realisation shaped our thinking, and led us to explore further opportunities for mentoring, discussed in our second project below.

A final phase of the research program was to mentor participants through writing up their reports for publication. This was done in three steps: first each mentor acted as an external audience and critical friend, providing feedback on their mentees' draft reports; next, mentors swapped mentee reports and provided independent feedback which each mentor and their mentee(s) then had to consider and finally, the editorial team (see Kuchah et al. forthcoming) engaged directly with the mentees to edit their final reports. These steps provided mentees with opportunities to interact with different mentors with international experience and learn about writing for an international audience.

Looking back at the program now, it seems that the collaborative nature of the design and process played an important role in motivating participants. Our adoption of an enhancement approach to mentoring (Kuchah 2013), which foregrounded teachers' own expertise and agency, empowered mentees to take greater control of their research projects; mentors served as facilitators of reflection, encouraging and enriching mentees' reflective practice (Gakonga 2019). Furthermore, designing the mentorship around teachers' own expressed needs and interests and personalising mentoring arrangements meant that teachers experienced some degree of control over their learning and were free to experiment in their classrooms as part of their research. This seemed to have influenced their views of their own teaching practices, as reported by a mentee whose research focus was on teaching large under-resourced classes: 'my research experience has made me realize that teaching in large classes with low resources could be viewed in a positive way in the sense that teachers have to bring more creativity and more strategies to make students involved in the learning process'. Another key theme emerging from mentee accounts was the realisation that students can play an important part in designing and teaching lessons. For example, a mentee reported that she had 'learned from this research that my students need to participate in decisions about the types of topics and some of the resources we use in class; this will make them more engaged'. Another mentee captured this in the following words:

> My exploratory research project has been very profitable for me as it has acted as an eye opener, proving to me that when learners' problems are identified with their help and solutions negotiated with them, the results are profound, beneficial to all and long lasting; the teaching, learning process is also very enjoyable to all.

The collaborative nature of this program also facilitated reciprocity in mentor-mentee interactions, enabling both Africa ELTA and ReSIG mentors to learn. Mentor reflections on their experiences suggested that the mentoring process gave them insights into teachers' experiences in contexts they were not familiar with and enriched their understanding of the world of TESOL. Indeed, mentors saw the program as part of their own CPD, one reporting 'it was a great, rewarding, and inspiring experience, which I would love to repeat'. The transformative nature of this program, which resonated in the feedback from all mentors, is encapsulated in the following quote from a mentor:

> I learned a lot about the realities of teaching in African secondary schools and how resourceful and dedicated teachers are. I got a small view into a part of the world that I don't know very well. I also learned more about exploratory action research and saw more of its impact in practice – and it is now something that I'd like to bring to CPD work with ESOL and EFL teachers in my part of the world through my chair role of a teacher development organisation in the North of England.

Our data illustrate the centrality of collegiality and knowledge co-construction within LTA-based mentoring based on reciprocal mentor-mentee relationships. As Gakonga (2019) highlights in reciprocal mentoring relationships, mentors can perform their role with the dual aim to contribute to the teaching profession, and to engage in their own reflective growth. We would argue that an LTA-based mentoring project has potential to be a space for formal and informal mentoring and professional development for both mentors and mentees, thus facilitating the goals of all involved. These goals include reducing the inequalities discussed above.

Africa ELTA Female Leadership Mentoring Program (FLMP)

Beginnings and preparations

In an effort to support female African classroom teachers to develop the necessary skills to demonstrate leadership through their active participation in local and international conferences,

Africa ELTA launched a call for applications for a remote mentoring program in collaboration with Equal Voices in ELT to mentor female classroom teachers in Africa to become conference presenters. More than 120 applications were received, which demonstrates the need for such a program, and Africa ELTA rigorously blind-reviewed applications (see Salama and Leather [2020] for details of the program design selection criteria). Eight female teachers were selected; they had to be classroom teachers in rural areas with limited access to resources because those are the teachers who lack the means to attend trainings that are usually organized in the city, far from their homes. They also had to show some evidence of leadership in their local community. First-time presenters were preferred, since the program was meant to be an introduction to conference presentation skills. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 30 years. The mentors came mainly from the UK, US, Honduras, and Spain. The mentees came from Senegal, Tanzania, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Burkina Faso.

As in the research project presented above, explaining the goals to both mentees and mentors was crucial. This is because a key reason for the success of any mentorship program is a commitment to program goals (Gagen and Bowie 2005; Kajs 2002). The second author, as program organizer and representative of Africa ELTA, held individual meetings with mentees at the beginning and during the program to clarify the difference between a formal teacher education program and this mentoring program, where mentees would receive professional support to improve their presentation skills. Those one-on-one meetings were important to explore the individual needs of mentees and hear about their concerns and challenges. Challenges that mentees shared were mainly about poor Internet connectivity and busy schedules. Being aware of these issues helped us to adapt the program to meet their needs. For example, meetings were not all held on Zoom in order to avoid consuming bandwidth. We created a WhatsApp group to create a less formal low-tech context to facilitate group interaction, dissipate power barriers and clarify expectations. Mentors adopted a reciprocal approach to teacher mentoring, aiming to make the process transformative (Kennedy, 2005). Given the flexibility and freedom to provide their input on the program outline and content, mentors created and shared a resource bank for mentoring sessions (see Salama and Leather, 2021, for details).

Building opportunities into the mentorship program for practice and supportive feedback

A key feature of the program was that mentees were invited to a practice presentation after six weeks. Beforehand, teachers were mentored on choosing a topic, selecting a focus, delivering the presentation, and were offered technical support. This practice session had three main goals, firstly to provide an opportunity for the mentees to receive feedback on their performance, and secondly to foster a sense of community and strengthen respect and trust; mentees had to present in front of all mentors and other mentees and receive formative feedback from both their peers and mentors during the session. Creating this sense of community was essential for the mentoring process because, as Hobson et al. (2009) suggest, 'an evaluative orientation to mentoring can interfere in the development of trust and open communication between mentor and mentee'. We advocated for supportive rather than judgemental mentoring, aiming for a safe place for mentees to develop their skills. The last goal was to test the mentees' ability to use the presentation online platform. The feedback the mentees received aimed to help them identify the areas and skills that needed more practice in the next 3-4 weeks of the program.

Mentees' Reflections: The influence of the multicultural dimension of the program

Reflecting afterwards, mentees praised the multicultural dimension of the program, as it gave them the chance to learn about other mentees' teaching contexts and challenges. One reported:

> The program has exposed me to different diversities from my fellow mentees and mentors which add flavour to my multicultural understanding. This understanding is very important to me as a public speaker since my task is addressing an audience with different cultural backgrounds.

Mentees shared their satisfaction with the program for offering them cultural exchange and networking opportunities through the multi-national community created by the participation of mentors and mentees.

Mentees' Reflections: Developing Presentation and Digital Skills

Reflecting on developing her presentation skills, one teacher reported:

> I have learnt the art of public speaking as I had never given a presentation before, whether physically or virtually. I was given different materials, samples and guidance to help me on this and now I am able to present to a diverse audience.

A benefit another teacher highlighted was learning to prepare her presentation using "attractive slides". The opportunity to improve their language and digital skills were other benefits that were mentioned. One teacher reflected:

> As a teacher I have been using English to teach, but I always communicate in Kiswahili (my native language) because the people around me use Kiswahili a lot. Sometimes we do forget how to even respond in daily conversations in English. In this program, I had to communicate in English with my mentor and others in writing and during conversations, so I have improved my English a lot with this practice.

Another mentee noted:

> I learnt a new tool of communication, Zoom. If I wasn't in this programme, I wouldn't have known how to operate it, and I'm sure I'll get to know others.

Building mutual bonds through mentoring.

Mentors valued the learning experience, one citing, for example: "the opportunity to develop a friendship with another teacher, watching her develop through her hard work and dedication, and the opportunity to find out about so many different contexts". Another mentor expressed how the program had helped her develop her mentoring skills since it was her first experience as a mentor. Mentees also felt they benefitted from the relationship, for example in developing multicultural understanding, as noted above. Overall, both mentors and mentees reported that the program had expanded their horizons. This finding confirms the transformative value of reciprocal mentoring encounters (Gakonga, 2019) characterized by collegiality and mutual support, where mentors act as advisers while also learning about mentees' contexts of work.

Final reflections and implications

Developing teacher mentoring programs within LTAs in low-resource contexts, such as found in Africa, needs to take an approach that responds to teachers' needs in their unique local contexts. Given the symmetrical and collegial nature of the relationships within LTAs, such as Africa ELTA, these LTAs can best maximize the benefits offered to their members through building on

international and local collaborations that seek meaningful and contextually appropriate programs and initiatives. However, given that the outcomes of mentoring can be affected by the different cultural backgrounds of both the mentees and mentors (Johnson 2003; Vásquez 2004), and given that the concept and practice of mentoring is still not fully understood in the literature and not commonly used in Africa, the expectations and roles of the mentor and mentees need to be communicated clearly from the beginning.

It is therefore necessary to have program organizers who are very aware of the context-bound challenges and the needs of the local teachers involved, as here. In the two programs outlined in this chapter, some mentees arrived at the program with the expectations that mentoring would involve spoon-feeding, with their mentors writing their research reports or creating their presentation slides for them. Socialization as to each other's cultural orientations is therefore crucial. For example, it was puzzling and disappointing for some mentors who had no knowledge of the mentees' cultural background at the beginning to find out that a mentee was asking them to create their slides or proofread their text. This gap in knowledge can result in a failure to meet the mentees' and program's expectations. A training session, one-on-one meetings or a brief orientation on how to become a mentee and what to expect when mentoring teachers from a different context was required to provide the participating teachers and mentors with the opportunity to fully benefit from the experience. Although this orientation and constant support was provided for mentees in the female leadership program, some mentors in the program reported that a more guided orientation was also needed for those mentors who were new to mentoring. Moral and professional support for mentors and mentees beyond communicating the program goals proved to be important in such initiatives. This is something to consider in future planning.

However, the challenges of mentoring teachers in low-resource contexts are amplified by the challenging circumstances they work in. Developing a mentoring plan that has the program's general objectives, but that also leaves room for change and re-design based on emerging needs is important when working with classroom teachers in low-resource contexts. For mentoring to be effective and skills learned to be useful, both mentors and mentees need to be familiar with the challenges that may undermine their efforts so they can work together to find solutions that meet the program goals. This understanding of the socio-cultural background of both mentors and

mentees is essential in creating programs in Africa, or any local context, that involves collaboration among LTAs locally and internationally.

The two mentoring programs reported on here were framed around the premise that for any teacher education program to be effective, it has to be localized, participant-centred and relevant to the needs and aspirations of the teachers involved. As we have reported, the design and implementation of these two mentoring initiatives allowed for the content of each mentee's project to be determined by the mentee themselves; the mentors' role was to support mentees through their personal journeys to discover their potential to resolve their own professional development needs, fostering a collegial relationship (van Louw and Waghid, 2008). For the teacher research project, mentees' needs were specifically related to challenges in classroom practice whereas for the female leadership program, mentees' needs were around developing the skills needed to be able to make their voices heard in professional circles, so that their contribution to language education in the continent could be better recognised and celebrated. Both initiatives have ultimately been beneficial to Africa ELTA more broadly, given that there is now a larger pool of confident professionals sharing their knowledge with other colleagues, both within their countries but also through the Africa ELTA webinar series and, as a result, inspiring hitherto shy colleagues to want to join future mentoring projects.

Engagement priorities

- Thinking of your own LTA context, what mentoring opportunities present themselves?
- What kinds of teacher needs are not yet met in existing teacher education programs in your context and what local initiatives do you think might be developed to start addressing these?
- What is the nature of the power relationships between mentors and mentees in your context? How could a participant-centred approach to mentoring be fostered?
- How are mentoring programs assessed in your institution/LTA? How could such assessment be more systematic and holistic?

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