

We Don't Bloom Alone: An Autoethnography on Mentorship, Wellbeing, and Growth

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This paper explores how multi-dimensional mentorship, across spiritual, academic, and entrepreneurial domains, functions as a developmental network that nurtures psychosocial wellbeing, identity formation, and generational impact for first-generation students navigating higher education. Drawing on an autoethnographic approach, I weave personal narrative with conceptual frameworks to examine the transformative power of mentoring relationships within culturally and structurally marginalized contexts. Specifically, the paper highlights how intentional mentorship systems provide more than academic support, they offer emotional grounding, purpose alignment, and identity affirmation. Rooted in my lived experience as a Ghanaian woman navigating academic and leadership spaces, this autoethnography illustrates how developmental networks, a constellation of diverse individuals who provide career and psychosocial support, create conditions for sustained flourishing. My journey from a rural community in Ghana to academic leadership and social impact in the United States is used to foreground how mentoring ecosystems shape not only individual outcomes but also contribute to collective transformation. Mentorship is positioned as a strategic and systemic intervention that disrupts isolation, empowers first-generation students, and seeds broader leadership pipelines. This paper contributes to mentorship literature by centering transnational and African diasporic perspectives often underrepresented in traditional research. I argue that mentoring should be understood as a justice-oriented, multidimensional practice capable of fostering belonging, resilience, and generational uplift. In educational systems marked by inequities and cultural displacement, mentoring becomes a lifeline, a web of relationships that empower individuals to bloom and, in turn, create space for others to thrive. This work calls on institutions, educators, and practitioners to intentionally design mentoring ecosystems that are inclusive, culturally attuned, and rooted in care.

Keywords: Mentorship, autoethnography, developmental networks, first-generation students, wellbeing

Introduction

The journey toward growth is rarely walked alone. For individuals like me, navigating higher education as a first-generation college student from an under-resourced community, mentorship served as a lifeline, transforming isolation into connection, confusion into clarity, and potential into realized purpose (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2009). In this paper, I explore the layered impact of mentorship through an autoethnographic lens, drawing from my experiences as a Ghanaian woman to illustrate how developmental relationships across academic, spiritual, and entrepreneurial domains supported my psychosocial wellbeing, identity, leadership, and generational transformation (Hernandez et al., 2018).

The metaphor “we don’t bloom alone” captures the heart of this inquiry. Just as plants thrive not by chance but through intentional cultivation, by soil, sunlight, water, and care, so do people flourish when surrounded by guidance, belief, and opportunity. My story illustrates how intentional,

multidimensional mentorship, particularly for first-generation and marginalized learners, acts as fertile ground for both personal growth and broader community impact (Liang et al., 2008). Tracing my journey from a rural community in Ghana to a doctoral program in the United States, I illuminate the unseen support systems and mentoring relationships that enabled me to thrive and ultimately pour into others.

Rather than treating mentorship as a static relationship, I frame it as a dynamic and collective force. I examine how layered mentorship serves as a developmental network, defined as a constellation of individuals who offer diverse psychosocial and career support (Kram, 1985; Higgins & Kram, 2001), and as a communal model of mentoring, grounded in collective uplift, spiritual connection, and mutual care (Shotton et al., 2007). These frameworks position mentorship as a justice-oriented intervention that fosters long-term wellbeing and flourishing, particularly in the lives of students navigating systemic invisibility and cultural transition. By bridging conceptual models with lived experience, I argue that cultivating diverse,

culturally grounded mentoring ecosystems is not optional, it is essential for building communities where growth is sustained, multiplied, and shared. Grounded in real experiences, this paper extends the conversation by centering my voice as a first-generation African international woman navigating academic spaces shaped by cultural dislocation, systemic invisibility, and transnational belonging (Bhattacharya, 2017). I highlight the need for more global and diasporic narratives in mentorship literature and affirm the value of autoethnography as a method of both scholarly contribution and healing across borders (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013). Specifically, this paper serves three key purposes: (1) to explore how mentorship, when relationally and culturally grounded, fosters identity development and wellbeing; (2) to demonstrate how autoethnographic storytelling can serve as a valid epistemological tool for underrepresented students; and (3) to contribute a transnational African perspective to the broader literature on mentoring, resilience, and academic flourishing. These aims are interwoven throughout the narrative, literature, and discussion, offering a holistic view of mentorship as both personal and political practice.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholarship has explored mentorship and identity development in higher education using autoethnographic approaches, which involve researchers like me drawing from our personal experiences to illuminate broader sociocultural phenomena (Jones et al., 2016). This method is particularly prominent among international, diasporic, and marginalized individuals who use storytelling, memory, and reflexivity as legitimate forms of academic knowledge production and resistance.

I am inspired by scholars such as Dillard (2000), Boylorn (2013), and Love (2019), who underscore the significance of voice and lived experience in navigating educational systems that have historically excluded underrepresented groups. Boylorn (2013), for example, illustrates how Black women use blogging as a form of autoethnographic expression that blends cultural critique and personal narrative. Love (2019) contributes a critical mentoring praxis grounded in her own journey as a Black woman. More recently, Linder et al. (2020) argue that intersectional feminist mentoring practices serve as spaces for co-learning and community-building that validate lived experience as knowledge. These approaches are particularly vital for people like me, scholars of color and first-generation learners, who often face cultural taxation and systemic exclusion in higher education (Zambrana & MacDonald, 2019).

While much of this literature centers on Black women's experiences in the United States, I've also observed similar methodological approaches emerging globally. For instance, Henry (2021) explores the role of mentorship and multidirectional care networks among Black women educators in

global academic contexts. Her findings emphasize how diasporic and transnational mentoring relationships can foster mutual empowerment, spiritual grounding, and identity affirmation. Likewise, research from regions such as South Africa (Msibi, 2013), the Caribbean (Hall, 2021), and the UK (Mirza, 2009) reveals that autoethnography can expose the entangled layers of coloniality, displacement, and belonging within academic identity formation.

In this paper, I build on and extend these traditions by centering my lived experiences as a first-generation African international woman navigating the academy. Viewed through a transnational lens, I bring attention to mentorship as it relates to global mobility, cultural dislocation, and the search for belonging in foreign academic landscapes. In doing so, I position African womanhood as a vital site of scholarly insight and reflective practice, demonstrating how mentorship, when culturally and contextually grounded, can foster wellbeing, resilience, and collective empowerment across borders.

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

This paper is situated within an autoethnographic tradition that views personal experience as a valid and generative site of scholarly inquiry. As Ellis et al. (2011) explain, autoethnography connects the personal to the political and the individual to the cultural. In this work, my life becomes both data and lens, offering a situated reflection on how mentoring across academic, spiritual, and entrepreneurial spaces fosters personal wellbeing and collective transformation.

In this paper, wellbeing is understood as a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational flourishing, particularly in the context of navigating adversity and cultivating purpose (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Keyes, 2002).

The conceptual foundation of this paper is informed by three intersecting frameworks:

1. Developmental Network Theory (Kram, 1985; Higgins & Kram, 2001): This theory posits that effective mentoring often occurs through multiple developmental relationships that provide a range of career and psychosocial support. These networks may involve academic advisors, peer mentors, spiritual leaders, and entrepreneurial collaborators. Such a framework is particularly useful in examining how individuals from marginalized backgrounds access diverse forms of mentorship across life domains.
2. Relational Mentoring Theory (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Crisp & Cruz, 2009): This framework emphasizes mentorship as a dynamic, mutual process grounded in authenticity, vulnerability, and growth. Rather than viewing mentorship as a top-down transaction, it highlights its transformative potential for both mentors and mentees, especially critical for first-generation scholars whose identities often sit at the

periphery of dominant academic cultures.

3. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000): Drawing on the lived experiences of Black women, this perspective underscores the importance of spiritual grounding, cultural survival, and collective care. The notion that “we don’t bloom alone” reflects a communal ethos deeply embedded in Black and African diasporic traditions, where mentorship is rooted in shared struggle, affirmation, and intergenerational growth.

Together, these frameworks guide the analysis by illuminating how multi-layered mentorship ecosystems foster not only academic development but also emotional, spiritual, and leadership flourishing. It is at this intersection of theory and lived experience that this paper makes its contribution: positioning mentorship as both structure and sustenance, a justice-centered system of care, a strategy for wellbeing, and a pathway toward generational flourishing.

Narrative and Lived Experience

I was born and raised in a rural community in Ghana, where opportunities were often constrained by systemic poverty rather than personal potential. From an early age, I encountered the realities of educational inequity. Unlike peers whose families could afford basic school supplies, I began my educational journey without textbooks, often walking long distances to school on an empty stomach and wearing a tattered uniform that affected my confidence. With no resources at home, I would visit friends after school to hand-copy entire textbooks by candlelight, page by page, desperate to access the same learning my teachers were drawing from.

No one offered to share; most were struggling themselves. Yet, despite the humiliation and hardship, I knew my current circumstances were not the totality of my destiny. I began to see the world beyond what was immediately visible because even within this scarcity, I found early forms of indirect mentorship: stories of scholarship recipients from neighboring towns, prayers whispered by a devout grandmother, and televised examples of academic and career excellence planted the seeds of possibility. These formative influences acted as the light, water, and soil that quietly nourished my belief that I, too, could flourish. This is because these glimpses of possibility, though scattered and subtle, acted as early forms of indirect mentorship that rooted my belief that I, too, could rise. Though my body was often weary, my spirit remained receptive. I began to understand that mentorship didn’t always look like a formal relationship, it could be the quiet influence of someone else’s story, a moment of kindness, or a vision of a life not yet lived. These fragments of guidance became my light, my water, my soil, and from them, a fierce determination began to grow.

My first direct encounter with mentorship emerged in secondary school. Perceived as too soft-spoken to lead, I was often overlooked by teachers. One mentor, however, saw leadership not in volume but in conviction. Under this teacher’s guidance, I ran for, and was elected, head girl, despite lacking the loud charisma typically associated with student leaders. My peers recognized my depth, and even my more vocal competitor became my assistant. The experience transformed my identity. Mentorship moved beyond inspiration, it became activation. With coaching, affirmation, and accountability, the teacher helped me push past the internalized fear that I wasn’t “enough”, not confident enough, not assertive enough, not visible enough, to lead.

After high school, mentorship again shaped a critical turning point. While teaching at a school as a recent graduate, I received a surprising job offer from the principal, an opportunity to stay and work long-term in exchange for funding my teacher training. Although seemingly generous, the offer was laced with emotional coercion and power imbalances. It required me to relinquish a prestigious, fully funded university scholarship I had already secured. Torn between gratitude and uncertainty, I hesitated, until a peer mentor, a senior already enrolled in the same scholarship program, reminded me of my agency and worth. With courage reignited, I declined the offer and was dismissed from my job shortly before starting university. It was a moment of loss, but also liberation. My “no” became the beginning of everything. In the absence of formal support from family, my mother, though loving, lacked the educational background to guide such decisions, mentorship filled the gap and realigned my trajectory.

Throughout my undergraduate studies in Ghana, a master’s program at a top U.S. university, and now my pursuit of a doctoral degree, mentorship has remained the common thread. I benefited from diverse mentorship ecosystems, academic advisors, peer guides, spiritual mentors, and entrepreneurial coaches, each offering more than instruction. They provided clarity in confusion, affirmation during isolation, and grounding through moments of doubt and burnout. Spiritual mentors, especially, helped me discern purpose in seasons where my academic rigor clashed with emotional fatigue. Entrepreneurial mentors coached me to align leadership with rest, vision with service.

Mentorship didn’t just help me grow; it helped me bloom. Today, I embody that same ethos, pouring mentorship into others through initiatives I founded, supporting first-generation students, young women, and emerging African leaders across borders. My voice, once muted by self-doubt, now equips and empowers others. My story affirms a central truth: we don’t bloom alone, and because I was mentored, many others are blooming through me.

Discussion

This narrative on lived experiences offers more than personal reflection; it illustrates mentorship as an interdependent ecosystem for identity, development, wellbeing, and social transformation. Through a developmental network theory lens (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Yip & Kram, 2017), my growth and transformation is revealed not as a product of a singular mentor but of a web of dynamic relationships, academic, spiritual, peer-based, and entrepreneurial and program-based mentors functioned as an integrated structure for flourishing, each contributing unique forms of psychosocial and developmental support. This aligns with Kram's (1985) and Higgins & Kram's (2001) assertions that developmental relationships often emerge from multiple sources, each offering unique forms of guidance.

What makes my journey distinctive is not the quantity of mentorship, but its multidimensional and intersectional nature. Academic mentors offered guidance in navigating institutional systems and career paths. Spiritual mentors fortified my internal compass, helping me anchor in faith amid adversity. Entrepreneurial mentors translated vision into leadership and reminded me that ambition must be sustainable. This resonates with relational mentoring theory (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Crisp & Cruz, 2009), which emphasizes mentoring as a mutual, growth-oriented, and emotionally attuned relationship rather than a top-down transactional one. These insights are echoed in Linder et al. (2020), who argue that mentoring must attend to the lived realities of race, gender, and class, cultivating spaces of shared vulnerability and transformative dialogue.

My journey also affirms insights from Black feminist thought, particularly Collins' (2000) emphasis on interdependence and collective empowerment. My current role as a mentor, through my foundation (SHE 4 Change) and digital platforms, is not a departure from my experience, but rather an evolution of it. This aligns with Collins' (2000) Black feminist framework of interdependence and legacy building. My approach to mentorship echoes Henry's (2021) work on multidirectional mentoring, where reciprocal relationships nurture both the mentor and mentee across spiritual, emotional, and academic domains. Through my work with my Foundation (SHE 4 Change), I have directly supported over 200 individuals in Ghana through educational, mentorship, and skills-based initiatives. My digital platforms extend this reach significantly, with over 800,000 individuals impacted through mentorship-driven content, leadership programs, and empowerment initiatives. These platforms function as mentorship ecosystems in their own right, guiding, equipping, and inspiring historically marginalized youth, especially girls, women, and early-stage entrepreneurs across borders. My work, having directly impacted individuals in Ghana and through digital ecosystems globally, exemplifies the ripple effect of culturally grounded

mentorship in bridging systemic gaps.

This paper, situated within an autoethnographic tradition (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016), contributes to scholarship by positioning lived experience not merely as anecdotal, but as epistemologically rich data. Autoethnography enables a deeper understanding of mentorship as a political, spiritual, and educational act. As argued by Zambrana and MacDonald (2019), mentorship for scholars of color must challenge systemic exclusion while supporting holistic identity development. My story affirms that mentorship, when relationally and culturally situated, becomes a system of care that enables flourishing across borders and generations.

In educational systems where many first-generation and marginalized learners experience invisibility, my narrative demonstrates that wellbeing is not incidental, it is cultivated. Mentorship, when approached as an intentional ecosystem, becomes a structure of care, restoration, and resilience. It emerges as infrastructure: soft yet sturdy, emotional yet strategic. It shortens journeys that once spanned generations, opening pathways that restore, equip, and empower as it transforms lives that might have been left behind.

Implications for Practice and Scholarship

Mentorship, as illuminated through this autoethnographic account, is more than a support mechanism, it is a system of care, a catalyst for healing, and a vehicle for generational growth. The metaphor "we don't bloom alone" encapsulates the essence of this work: just as a single flower thrives within an intentional ecosystem, so too do individuals flourish when nurtured by relational, emotional, and cultural guidance.

Implications for practice are both institutional and grassroots. Educators and program designers must build diverse mentoring ecosystems, rooted in trust, culturally relevant, and emotionally attuned. Academic advising should be accompanied by psychosocial care; leadership cultivation must include spiritual and communal grounding. Such ecosystems should extend beyond campuses to churches, homes, and mission-driven enterprises. Implications for scholarship invite a reframing of mentorship literature. By integrating autoethnographic inquiry with developmental and relational frameworks, this work argues for mentorship as a justice-oriented intervention, especially critical for first-generation and diasporic learners. It affirms that personal narrative is not peripheral to knowledge; it is central.

For those on the journey, students, emerging leaders, educators, this paper offers a reminder: mentorship is both memory and mission. Because one person was mentored, others can rise. Mentorship multiplies. It doesn't just grow people, it grows communities, movements, and futures.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how layered and

multidimensional mentorship, viewed through an autoethnographic lens, functions as both a developmental network and a seedbed for flourishing. Tracing my journey from rural Ghana to academic leadership and global impact reveals that mentorship is not merely guidance, it is structure, sustenance, and possibility. Mentorship, as both memory and mission, reminds us that we never bloom alone, and because my life was nurtured, many others can now flourish. This is the power of mentoring ecosystems: they multiply impact across generations and borders.

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