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Peer mentoring and intercultural understanding: Support for refugee-background and immigrant students beginning university study

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effects of the *Equity Buddies Program*, an intercultural cross-level mentoring course designed to link more advanced university students, as mentors, with first year refugee-background or immigrant students. It was designed to address the needs of refugee-background and immigrant students as they transitioned into university culture. The data included mentors' written reflections, log books, and a brief demographic survey. Through the processes adopted in the course, it was found that cross-cultural pairing influenced mentors' intercultural understandings, enabled cross-cultural relationships to develop and provided opportunities for students to interact with people of other cultures and religions. Mentors changed their views of others – of immigrants, of refugees, and also of Anglo-Australians. They experienced increased personalised understanding or gained a widened perspective of their mentees who were of cultures different from their own. Mentors stated that over time their interactions evolved into either a mutually rewarding friendship or a comfortable relationship within a learning community that valued collective learning. It is proposed that increased intercultural understanding emerges from an increased emphasis on the creation of meaningful, transactional relationships among culturally diverse students within a supportive academic environment.

Introduction

While beginning university study is difficult for most students, refugee-background, immigrant and international students inevitably face additional challenges (James, Kraus, & Jennings, 2010; Woods et al., 2013). Studies that focus on refugee-background students at the higher education level are, however, relatively rare. Furthermore, most of the studies in this field problematise refugee-background students themselves, cataloguing their difficulties (Ernest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), rather than researching issues related to the supports they may need within the university context. Two British studies (Gateley, 2015; Hannah, 1999) have focussed on possible solutions, but their major concern is with pathways into university. Much of the existing research on this topic has been conducted at the school level. McBrien (2005) provided an early review of this literature; this was supplemented more recently by McCarthy & Vickers (2012). A further example is provided by Chan and Birman (2009) who examined the impact of school diversity on friendship development and acculturation in relation to Vietnamese immigrants. Studies of programs that aim to create greater intercultural understanding between refugee-background/immigrant students and local students are relatively uncommon.

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Focusing on the higher education level, numerous university-based programs and classes have been established in an attempt to bridge the gap between international and local students (Brown, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Hotta & Toomey, 2013; Woods, et al., 2013). Others aimed to create competence-based approaches (Brown & Daly, 2005; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012) in order to generate support for sustained intercultural interaction. Additional studies suggest pedagogical approaches (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006; Williams & Johnson, 2011) which have been identified as useful for overcoming the resistance of local students in relation to forming intercultural connections, understanding and friendships. Holmes and O'Neill (2012) created a particularly useful model for understanding the development of intercultural competence that focused on how individuals acquire and evaluate their own intercultural competence. Their research illustrated the need for continuous contact, empathy and reflection as important in the development of student's own awareness of the development of their intercultural competence.

Only a few studies at the university level have analyzed programs that focus on creating greater intercultural understanding within the student body in relation to refugee-background students, or on promoting sustained interaction among student peer groups in order to establish a more supportive social environment for refugees and immigrants. Research that does both is sorely needed, and it is the purpose of this article to address this problem. The present paper is intended to help close this gap in the literature.

While the field of intercultural communication competence (ICC) has grown enormously since its inception (Ruben, 2015; Spitzberg, 2015), areas of concern still exist (Arasaratnam, 2015; Collier, 2015). Collier, for example, notes gaps in the literature that include insufficient focus on interaction as the processes through which intercultural competence is constructed. She also notes gaps in the focus on relationships which, she argues, are negotiated, dynamic and influenced by the characteristics of the individuals involved (2015:2). Ruben also notes a positive tendency in the field to move away from linear, "media-message" notions of communication to more nuanced understandings of ICC that should include transactional, constructivist perspectives. (2015: xx).

In the current paper, we conceptualize intercultural competence as encompassing intercultural understanding, following the directions proposed by Collier (2015) and Ruben (2015). Following their suggestions, we place an increased emphasis on the creation of meaningful, transactional relationships among culturally diverse students, as part of the process of acquiring intercultural competence within a supportive academic environment. Given this particular focus, the current article uses the term intercultural understanding, rather than the broader term intercultural competence.

Additionally, the work of scholars in the field of community psychology (Dinh, Weinstein, Nemon, & Rondeau, 2008; Silvia & Isidro, 2008) provides a fruitful area of concern in relation to the study of the acculturation of newcomers into social units. They focus on the ways in which sustained contact between host and newcomer individuals can influence and change the host culture, at both individual and community levels. The current article follows this theorisation; it moves in a new direction by focussing on the effects of mentoring on the dominant culture. In this regard, it represents a departure from the usual preoccupation in the literature, which tends to focus solely on the impact of programs on recipients.

Peer mentoring programs generally connect more senior students (mentors) with new students (mentees) in a group situation, with one mentor and one or more mentees. They have been employed by universities for a number of years to support the transition and retention of first year students. Research on this topic suggests that benefits extend to influencing student satisfaction, commitment to university, increased civic engagement, civically-minded attitudes, and self-esteem (Sanchez et al., 2006; Weiler et al., 2013). However, studies on peer mentoring programs have mostly reported the effects of mentoring on refugee-background or international students themselves. Research examining impacts on the mentor has been described as an understudied area (Weiler et al., 2013; p. 237) which our study seeks to remedy.

Mentoring programs vary across university contexts. Mentors may be volunteers (Freeman & Kelton, 2004; O'Brien, Llamas, & Stevens, 2012) or they may involve a form of an hourly payment or an honorarium (O'Brien et al., 2012) or credit towards study (Vickers & Zammit, 2015; Weiler et al., 2013). An administrator usually allocates the mentor-mentee pairings, but details about how the selection is made tends to be omitted. Considerations such as cross-cultural pairings or groupings are rarely described. The amount of time allocated for student support for an optimal program is a semester or a minimum of six weeks (Woods et al., 2013). Reflection is a key component of the programs for mentors and mentees, as they negotiate their interactions and consider directions based on course materials and the needs of their mentees (Weiler et al., 2013).

As Colvin and Volet (2014) pointed out, local students rarely take advantage of opportunities for interaction with culturally-different students. Given this dynamic, and knowing that relationships with local students are essential for the acculturation of refugees and immigrants, we chose to focus our research on the processes whereby mentors might, through their acquisition of intercultural understanding, learn to provide appropriate empathy and support to their mentees.

Our research aimed to investigate (i) to what extent sustained interaction between peer mentors and mentees leads to greater intercultural understanding *on the part of mentors* and (ii) the potential for creating more supportive social environments on campus for refugee-background students. Following an approach documented by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) where student researchers were encouraged to pursue an "inward contemplation of their own intercultural competence" (2012:707) this article has adopted an analogical approach. It focuses on the reflective experience of mentors and explores three research questions:

- In what ways did mentors enrolled in a peer mentoring support program develop broader intercultural understandings of refugee-background students and other immigrants on a university campus?
- What was the nature of the interpersonal relationships that developed between mentors and mentees?
- In what ways did the participation of mentors in debriefing groups and their experience of collective learning contribute to intercultural understanding?

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