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Tapping into the teaching experiences of final year education students to increase support for students in their first year

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Abstract

This study investigates the mentorship of pairing first year and final year teacher education students during their school placements or practicum. Participating students were studied using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach and undertaking Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to interpret their experience and their stress levels in the peer mentorship program. This peer mentoring program offered benefits for the first year education students by reducing their stress levels significantly and providing reassurance about their performance during school practicum. It also prepared the final year students for taking on teacher mentor roles. While the student mentorship program cannot replace the support provided by schools and universities, it does offer first year students reassurance as to their practical teaching abilities and performance. In addition, this study provides several perspectives on student mentorship during teaching practicum that are worthy of further research.

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Introduction

Peer mentoring has been studied worldwide by the extensive international literature on the development of peer mentoring programs. For example, Gutknecht-Gmeiner (2011) has developed the peer review assessment tool for improving the provision of Vocational Education Training in Finland. In the United States of America (USA), Sanchez, Bauer, and Paronto (2006) investigated peer mentoring programs for first year students in terms of satisfaction, commitment, and retention to graduation. A large-scale peer mentoring program was conducted across the United Kingdom (UK) and Norway to investigate how peer mentoring enhanced student success in higher education (Andrews & Clark, 2011). In the Republic of Ireland, the value of support for first year students was also emphasised in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), and research by Denny (2015) confirmed that Irish students valued peer mentoring as a huge support in transitioning smoothly into higher education. In Australia, the issue has also been subject to in-depth study. Heaney, Gatfield, Clarke, and Caelli (2006) used action research to evaluate peer mentoring in marketing courses and there is evidence that this type of learning is important for early stage teacher education students (Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Merrell Hansen, 2008; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). While it may be argued that peer mentoring is not the most effective way to facilitate learning, as it does not always provide accurate information (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; 2014), it does provide learners with convenient and informal opportunities to learn from those who are, or have been, in a similar situation (Aderibigbe, Antiado, & Sta Anna, 2015; Holland, Major, & Orvis, 2012).

In Australia, many universities require education students to undertake a short school placement during their first year of study (Geng & Midford, 2015). However, with limited

knowledge about their profession (French, Immekus, & Oakes, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Scott, Shan, Grebennikov, & Singh, 2008; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011), and limited experience of how to go about developing healthy relationships with their mentor teachers during their placement (Chung, 2008), their initial teaching experience in a school can be stressful (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000; Klassen et al., 2013; Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007). Appropriate assistance in transitioning to teaching was recognised as an important key to retention of first year students (Kift, 2009). Geng and Midford (2015) found that first year teacher education students experienced significantly higher stress levels than those in later years, and that lack of knowledge about the teaching profession and how to manage their school placement experience were strongly correlated with their stress levels. Although first year teacher education students in their study were aware of, and had access to various types of support provided by their university and placement schools, particularly from mentor teachers, more than half did not access any support provided by schools and universities (Geng & Midford, 2015).

Peer mentoring occurs continuously in daily life as information is sought from friends and colleagues. Boud et al. (2014) and Ladyshewsky (2005) state that learning from each other is not only a feature of learning within everyday activities, but it also happens where students share their learning experiences at all levels, inside, as well as outside the classroom. While on placement, initial teacher education students are required to work collaboratively with their supervisory mentor teachers in their placement schools. Mentoring is described as 'an interpersonal relationship that comprises a series of purposeful and social interactions' (Ambrosetti, 2014, p. 31), and has been identified as a strong factor in the development of new graduate education students' self-confidence, and use of a wider repertoire of strategies to meet the needs from their students

(Brondyk & Searby, 2013). During mentorship, there is a development of the relationship between the mentor and his/her student, which provides the underpinning for the growth of, not only the student's skills, but also the mentor's skills, both professionally and personally (Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002; Hudson, 2013; Walkington, 2004). Many projects have been developed to assist early stage teacher education students in their teaching practice. However, many of these projects focus on the development of mentor teachers (Ambrosetti, 2014), with little attention to benefits offered by peer mentoring. In Australia, mentor teachers typically adopt a supervisory role, where they are the experts (Ambrosetti, 2014; Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Sim, 2011). This often leads to a reduction of willingness for education students to discuss their experiences with their mentors (Boud et al., 2014). This suggests a need to prepare a quality mentorship program from a different perspective (Wang & Odell, 2002). Less intimidating, informal collegial advice between student peers can provide a different mechanism for quality professional learning. The contribution of peer learning as professional development has been unexplored, and further investigation around how it can contribute to early stage education students' learning is called for.

Although it is important to understand and develop healthy relationships between mentor teachers and initial teacher education students, there is also an absence of research and literature about the potential benefits that peer mentoring can bring to the learning experience. This poses a number of related questions: for example, what knowledge can pre-service students gain from peer learning that is not provided by their mentor teachers? Additionally, do peer student mentors gain reciprocal benefit from engaging in this role, as do mentor teachers in schools? In this regard, benefits may potentially include reflecting critically on their own practices (Shoffner, 2008; Walkington, 2004); having the

opportunity to make a difference to another's development as a teacher; and enhancing collegiality and a professional work ethic (Hudson, 2013; Walkington, 2005).

This study investigates the effects of the peer mentoring relationship between first year students at the beginning of their teaching training and experienced and successful final year teacher education students. The intention is to develop better support systems for those at the beginning of their teaching training; and improve the mentoring capacity of the final year students.

Methods

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to focus on how education students made sense of or interpreted their experiences and their stress levels during the peer mentoring program.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA recommends small homogenous sampling, with six participants being considered best practice, although it is acceptable to have between three and 15 participants for a group study (Reid, Flowers & Larkins, 2005). In IPA, participants are intensely involved in the research process so that they can provide researchers with an experiential understanding of the issues being studied. It is also important to identify the factors that are common across participants' practical, everyday understandings and knowledge (Benner, 1994; Gill, 2014). For this study, the IPA approach was used to offer participant perspectives on the shared experience first year initial education students who were provide mentoring support by final year education students.

In this study, both groups of students were undertaking their respective teaching

placements over four weeks in Semester One at the same school. The education students who were studying at the participating Australian university were informed about the proposed project; two pairs of first and final year teacher education students, who had undertaken their placements in the same schools, agreed to participate. The decision to undertake this peer mentoring research was made in consultation with course coordinators and lecturers, and the schools where the participating education students were undertaking their professional experience. Application and ethical clearance was obtained before the commencement of this project. All the participants have been given pseudonyms for ethical purposes.

As a qualitative research method, IPA may typically employ surveys, purposeful interviews, focus groups and iterative analysis of data (Reid et al., 2005). In this study, focus groups were used to acquire information from the participants about their experience and opinions around their placement to discuss the emergent themes generated through the analysis of individual narrations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Focus groups comprised three separate groups: a) first year students' focus group with the two first year students, b) final year students' focus group with the two final year students, and c) mixed year students' focus group interviews with all the four participants who were involved in the research project. The use of focus group interviews contributed to all the individual narrations in IPA and draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA requires researchers to examine individual participants as well as pay equal attention to all the participants (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). The aim for the project is to present an epistemological view provided by the rich descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

IPA requires researchers to code transcripts in considerable detail to draw out meaning from the raw data. As Smith (2011) points out, IPA acknowledges relevant theories but does not apply theories to the collected data. Rather it seeks to identify a particular pattern of meaning (Smith, 2011). Therefore, the researchers worked intensively with the data to understand the themes (e.g., peer mentoring in relation to the first and final year education students) that mattered to the participating students.

Perceived Stress Scale

In the present study, the two pairs of participants were also asked to complete the 10 item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) (Cohen & Williamson, 1988) once a week to estimate the their current psychological stress associated with completion of their weekly teaching practicum. A well-regarded stress scale, the PSS-10 was developed from the original PSS-14, a scale that measures the degree to which participants believe events in their life are currently unpredictable, uncontrollable and overwhelming. It is a self-report, response-balanced instrument that measures the level of recent perceived stress, using a 5-point response differential for each of the 10 statements (0 = never, 1 = almost never, 2 = once in a while, 3 = often, 4 = very often). Hence scores for an individual can range from 0 to 40 - the higher the score, the more stressful the participants perceive their current life situation. Summarised by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (2004), the PSS does not raise the possibility of psychiatric problems; rather it is a well-regarded tool, used by many researchers such as Applebaum, Fowler, Fielder, Osinubi, and Robson (2010), Cohen and Janicki-Deverts (2012) and Cohen, Janicki-Deverts and Miller (2007) to measure work-related stress. The analysis integrates the results of the PSS-10 together with quotes that represent and characterise the participants' experience of the peer mentoring program (Benner, 1994; Gill, 2014).

Findings

This section presents the findings from the four individual cases. The following sections report on the four participants' experiences and details the results that emerged from the focus groups in the themes of stress levels, first year education students' stressors and peer mentoring in relation to first year and final year education students. At the same time, the iterative IPA analysis has highlighted the similarities and differences of the individual cases.

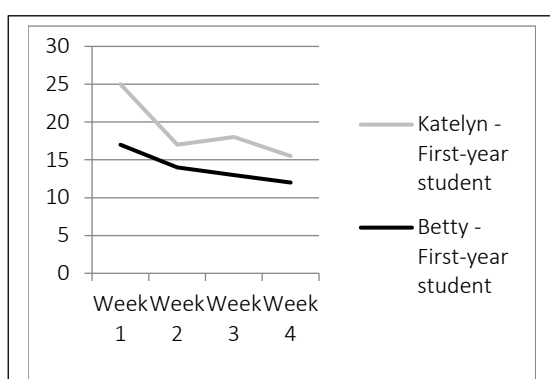


Figure 1: First-year students' stress levels (1-4 weeks) using PSS results

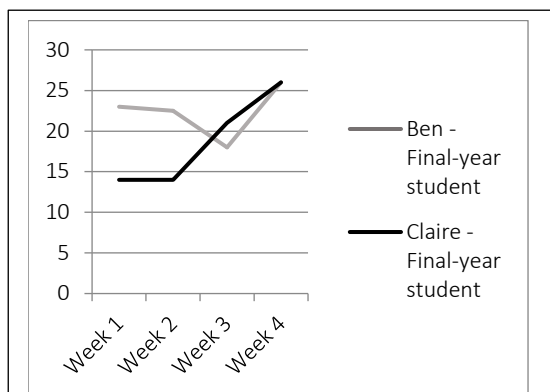


Figure 2: Final-year students' stress levels (1-4 weeks) using PSS results

Stress levels

The stress levels of the first year students were higher than their paired final year students' in their first week in teaching practice at schools. However, after the four weeks of paired mentoring and support, the first year students' stress levels were reduced (see Figure 1). In contrast, the final year education students' stress levels increased over the course of the study (see Figure 2).

First year education students' stressors

The interview data indicate that the main reason for the first year education students' high initial stress came from their lack of professional knowledge of how to integrate new learning and apply it to their teaching practice (French et al., 2005; Johnson, 2008).

Before the program started, the first year participant, *Katelyn, experienced high levels of stress.

Yes, we only just started...teaching tasks... like knowing the teachers telling me to do this specific thing, and again, not having enough knowledge and understanding of being able to deliver that.. that was hard.

*Betty, the other first year student, considered the main challenges or stressors for her first teaching practicums included her limited background knowledge of teaching. Betty's stress levels were also high at the beginning of the program, and she stated the biggest challenge during her first teaching practice was:

I was worried that I was not be able to teach in the classroom, because this is my first year...in the uni [university], I do not have much background knowledge and I will not blend in well.

Katelyn added that her stressors included lesson plan designing, classroom management, and understanding school culture. Classroom

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management, in particular, was also identified as a big stressor for initial year education students.

I was very stressed at the start or before...and once the first week was over, it was fine, and the second week fine... and then after the two lesson plans, [which were] very very challenging... and behaviour management issues...I did not have enough knowledge about dealing with that...

Betty also elaborated as to the reasons for her initial level of stress:

I had a really low group and it was my first teaching and my lesson plan did not cater for the particular group...that was hard... but gaining feedback from my mentor that I was able to build on that... a little bit...at the end...

Peer mentoring in relation to first year students

At the end of week 4, Katelyn's stress had decreased by approximately 30 percent from the first week into her placement. In relation to the peer learning experience, Katelyn added:

I found my mentor student can relate his teaching experience as mine... because he was stressed just like me...so if I need any assistance, I can easily go to him and ask for his advice.

Interestingly, she also mentioned that the final year student provided her with advice about meeting the Australian Professional Standards for Teacher. This finding illustrated that if meaningful support was provided, the first year students benefited hugely and their stress levels decreased.

He is telling me to pretty much to start now... as he is currently spending around 100 hours on it [collecting evidence for his portfolio]". Katelyn further stated my mentor teacher did not mention it at all... so that was the first time I heard it...

Following her paired experience with the final year mentor student, Betty discussed the nature of the support, such as guidance, that she found particularly useful.

It was nice to have someone even they have done it a while ago and even they do not need to be there, because obviously they have their own workload, but I was seeing them as a person to turn to... just like... am I doing it right? How do I tackle this issue?

She further stated:

It was great to ask my mentor teacher these questions, but it was good to hear from another mentor student, who is someone else doing the same as you.

Peer mentoring in relation to final year education students

While the final year education students indicated they benefited from being mentors, their focus group data suggest that they found mentoring a challenging addition to their normal commitments, and may have contributed to their increased stress levels.

*Ben, the participating final year student, considered mentorship as an interesting challenge for him. He mentioned:

I expected more contact with the first year student, and there were some issues with timing with the first year students, as they are quite nervous about the environment....

He emphasised that support from the placement school was needed during this mentorship program.

There was a need of more collaboration between university and schools... just like my teacher has never mentored before...so she is not 100% sure what forms she needs to complete...if the university is marketing the final year and first year pair mentorship, the school will be more ready for it... and school will understand more...

When discussing the benefit from the mentorship program, Ben stated “a less self-centred approach” was the biggest benefit. He emphasised that the paired first year students benefited more than the final year students during this program, however, he also predicted that “I think I will benefit [from] it... being a future mentor teacher later”.

When discussing her participation in this student mentorship program, *Claire, the other final year participant, agreed that peer support was particularly helpful in providing reassurance about practice - “because I am not university staff and she might feel easier to talk with the final year students... [with] more knowledge and become more confident”. She, however, mentioned the student mentorship only “happened half an hour here... and half an hour there...”, and there was a lack of consistency in being a peer mentor. She indicated:

The timing issue mainly came from the first year student, as they only came in for a day or two for the first few weeks, and it became difficult for me to contact and communicate ... however, I was in the school for the whole term...

Nevertheless, she agreed that this experience assisted her in thinking further about what the pre-service teachers, particularly initial year students, needed in schools, and “it opened my eyes... as I definitely would be a mentor teacher...”. The final year students benefited in developing mentor skills, such as personal communication skills. This gave them a better understanding of the initial year teacher education students.

Claire found this student mentorship program provided a way for the first year education students “to understand more clearly what they are expected to do”:

... going to the staff room...I know this is something really basic, but ... I know it is really daunting... sitting around the table with a lot of

people you [first year students] don't know and they all get this connection and you[first year students] don't... but with us who talk with you [first year students] and start to have a relationship with other people eventually...This is really beneficial to [first year]students to build that relationship... not just on your [first year students] own or talking with your [first year students] mobile phone... This is a really easy way to... start the relationship... other than your [first year students] mentors.

Discussion

This study makes five useful contributions to knowledge on the level and nature of peer mentoring for first and final year education students during their teaching practicum.

First, the study found that first year education students initially experienced high stress levels in their teaching practicum. This is consistent with the findings from the study by Geng and Midford (2015), which indicated that stressors for education students mainly came from the teaching practicum, and that education students had higher stress levels in their initial year, compared to subsequent years.

Second, the first-year students' main stresses came from their lack of professional knowledge of how to integrate new learning and apply it to their teaching practice. This accords with findings from Geng and Midford (2015), Murray-Harvey et al. (2000), Klassen et al. (2013) and Rieg et al. (2007) that education students' initial teaching experience in a school can be stressful as a consequence of their limited knowledge about their profession (French et al., 2005; Willcoxson et al., 2011).

Third, this study found peer mentoring provided convenient opportunities for education students to learn from those who are, or have been, in a similar situation (Aberbigbe et al., 2015; Holland et al., 2012). This reinforced that peer mentoring is important for early stage teacher education students (Nokes

et al., 2008; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). The findings in relation to support for first-year students are consistent with Ambrosetti's (2014) position that mentorship provides the underpinning for the growth of pre-service teachers' skills.

Fourth, although the peer mentoring does not help with final year students' stress, the finding that the final year students benefited in developing mentor skills, such as personal communication skills, is consistent with Ambrosetti (2014), Everston and Smithey (2000) and Giebelhaus and Bowman (2002), who all indicated that mentors' skills can grow both professionally and personally through the development of their relationship with the mentee education students. This experience accords with Boud et al.'s (2014) conclusion that learning from each other can occur, not only in formal courses, but also outside of the classroom where students can share their learning experience.

Finally, this student mentorship program provided initial year teacher education students with an extra dimension of support over and above that available from universities and schools. Feedback from the education students indicated that peer support was particularly helpful in providing reassurance about practice. These findings support Kift's (2009) theory that transition is an important key pedagogy for retaining initial year students.

Limitations and further research

This study has a number of limitations. For example, it involved only two pairs of teacher education student participants from a single university. Other limitations include the minimal existing frameworks in which to embed this study, which did not allow for comparison with the stress of non-participating first year students.

It was also noted that first year students did not approach their peer mentors for guidance on lesson design, but mainly about personal issues in classes, and reassurance around their teaching performance during practicums. "Sometimes, even I said it was ok, she still needed to confirm it". Although the supports provided by their student mentors were mainly about reassurance and confirmation of performance, the research reaffirmed that this form of mentoring provided a safe space to debrief and made the inexperienced first year students feel less stressed. Therefore, in the future, such programs could benefit from the recruitment of a greater number of students in order to better represent findings that are typical across the cohort.

The authors acknowledge that further research may be limited by a number of contributing factors. This includes the reality that not all schools are in a position to accommodate both groups of students and similarly, not all universities have programs with the flexibility to integrate such programs. Furthermore, future research would need to compare those first year students who go through the peer mentoring and those who do not, with a view to the development of a student mentor framework that embeds the roles of not only students but also teachers in schools, and academics from universities.

Implication and conclusion

This research has tapped into the reciprocal mentoring experiences of initial and final year teacher education students, with a view to better understanding both the effect of the stress experienced by the initial year students during their first school practicum, and the professional development opportunity it offered their final year peers.

In summary, this project made several important contributions to the understanding of peer mentorship development in teacher

education programs. The peer mentorship program assisted both first and final year education students. The first year students learned about the teaching profession by being exposed to the more mature student teacher perspective of final year students and consequently reduced their stress levels. The final year students learned mentoring, communication and time management skills from the mentoring experience.

Although this research does not suggest that the peer learning experience replaces teacher mentorship in schools and guidance from lecturers in universities, this study does suggest that student mentorship offers worthwhile additional potential, with participants identifying a number of benefits for the first and final year students. In addition, from the university perspective, it can assist in providing increased opportunities to identify and develop more supportive systems and consequently improve retention. Finally, the study provided several perspectives on peer learning and student mentorship during teaching practice that are worthy of further research.

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