Title: **'Feeling part of a Network of Learners in Health Promotion': An Evaluation of a Postgraduate Peer Mentoring Scheme in Ghana.**

Ruth Cross, Diane Lowcock, Jerry Fiave, Sarah Agyeniwah and Grace Kafui Annan.

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Abstract

Much is known about the value of peer mentoring in under-graduate programmes however, little has been published about this in the context of transition into postgraduate education, particularly in low-middle income countries. This paper reports on an evaluation of peer mentoring on an MSc Public Health Promotion programme delivered in Ghana. Qualitative methods were used to elicit the experiences of thirty-five students using methods including focus group discussions that involved guided reflection. Data were analysed using a framework adapted from Kram's (1983) Model of Mentoring. Several key themes were identified: practical benefit; social benefit and emotional benefit; future benefit; and facilitating factors and challenges. The peer-mentoring scheme evaluated well benefitting both mentees and mentors. More importantly for Ghana, the relationships that developed between the mentees and mentors bode well for building a community of experts in health promotion that is key to tackling Ghana's health and development agenda.

Keywords: peer mentoring, post-graduate, transition, evaluation, qualitative, Ghana

Introduction

Postgraduate transition

Transition in higher education is a crucial feature of the student experience (Tangney, 2018). Lizzio's (2011) Student Lifecycle Framework categorizes four stages of transition. The fourth stage, 'transition up, out and back' includes students entering post graduate study. Such students experience a number of academic and social anxieties (Matheson and Sutcliffe, 2018). This transition has been described as a 'challenging and sometimes troublesome' process requiring support (Matheson, 2018 p. 9). Support might be developing academic skills or facilitating interaction and learning opportunities with other students (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). Tangney (2018, p. 81) also notes that transition can be made smoother through 'active learning pedagogies' whereby students develop the skills needed to manage their own student lifecycle. Transition interventions can take different forms, one example is peer mentoring.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is an effective means of supporting transition through higher education (Christie, 2014). It is often used in clinical settings/education (Ehrgott and Silberer, 2014), or to develop academic performance and transferable skills (Ragavan, 2014). It is argued that peer support is crucial for students' academic integration and achievement (Byl e*t al,* 2016). Peer mentoring takes different forms (Colvin and Ashman, 2013). For example, a second undergraduate year student mentoring a first year undergraduate student (Vulliamy and Junaid, 2013) or a structured formal relationship between a postgraduate and an undergraduate (Brace *et al,* 2018). Notwithstanding the difficulties around the lack of an agreed definition (Collings, *et al.,* 2014), it is essentially about a more experienced student

helping or working with a less experienced student in some way (Campbell, 2015). The value of peer mentoring schemes in higher education is relatively well documented (Gardiner *et al.,* 2014). Mentoring schemes can enhance a sense of belonging and shared identity within a group of students (Kensington-Miller, 2017) aiding in the establishment of a community of practice (Wenger and Snyder, 2000) by promoting collaboration and interpersonal relationships (Lewis and Olshanksy, 2016).

The peer mentoring scheme

The rationale for this peer mentoring scheme was to establish a community of health promotion learners with a shared identity (Wang *et al.,* 2003), to help the mentees adapt more effectively to new ways of learning and to their identity as post-graduate learners (Zepke and Lecah, 2005), and to counter the potential isolation that the post graduate learners might experience as part-time students who only come together for classes twice a year (Becker, 2004). The aims of the peer mentor scheme were 1) to build and strengthen community and collegiate identity between the two cohorts and 2) to enhance students' professional networks with a view to long-term reciprocal relationships and the establishment of an in-country alumni network.

Egege (2015) notes that there are inconsistencies in the literature about how peer mentoring is applied. Consequently, there is no prescribed way of establishing a peer mentor scheme. The wider literature explores different formal, semi-formal and informal mechanisms for mentoring. This scheme in Ghana was largely informal although initially had some formal elements. Colley (2003 in Ragavan, 2014, p. 294) purports that there are two types of mentoring: 'natural' (more organic) and 'facilitated' (more structured). In keeping with Ragavan's (2014) approach we used a combination of these. At the outset a *facilitated* approach was adopted whereby mentors and mentees were matched together and provided

with each other's contact details. A formal opportunity for the mentees and mentors to meet was built into the beginning of the course followed by an informal social event. Subsequently the mentor/mentee relationships were left to develop in a more *natural* way.

The MSc in Ghana is delivered using a 'blended' approach (Dziuban *et al.*, 2018) that involves two 2-week teaching visits in country per year and on-line learning prior to/after the teaching visits. Students were partners in the scheme from its inception playing a crucial role in buddying up the mentors and mentees and managing the formal and informal components. Peer mentor schemes carry an element of risk as well as reward (Colvin and Ashman, 2010) and the different expectations of mentors and mentees needed to be managed carefully from the outset. Therefore, the students produced a group contract during the induction in order to delineate clear role boundaries.

Egege (2015, p. 267) points out that, 'the literature unequivocally supports the benefits of mentoring to the mentee' however, Abott-Anderson *et al.,* (2016) note that there is very little published literature describing student-to-student mentoring relationships in higher education. What does exist tends to focus on undergraduate schemes and there is a dearth of publications about peer mentoring at post-graduate level. An exception is Byl *et al.*'s (2016) paper on the value of peer learning in first-year postgraduate students however, this has a different emphasis as compared with peer mentoring. Peer mentoring is a supportive role whilst peer learning is more instructive. There is little literature on formal evaluation of peer mentoring schemes and about peer mentoring in higher education in the global south. This paper is an attempt to address this. It reports on an evaluation of the peer mentor scheme which sought to explore the impact of the scheme on the mentors and mentees.

Methods

Qualitative methods were used to explore the experiences of the students in the scheme. All students (35) in the mentoring scheme participated in the evaluation which comprised two parts. The first part took place near the beginning of the scheme at the end of the two-week induction. The 35 mentors and mentees were asked to reflect and give anonymous written feedback on the impact that the scheme had had on them at that point. No questions or prompts were used to illicit the responses. The second part took place twelve months later and involved four focus group discussions – two carried out with the mentees and two with the mentors. Each focus group lasted approximately an hour and fifteen minutes and included guided activities facilitated by the project team (establishing a timeline of the mentor/mentee relationship, reflecting on what had gone well and what might be improved). Ethical approval was gained through the Leeds Beckett University Faculty Ethics Committee.

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data, together with the data from part one of the evaluation, was analysed by two of the project team. The team familiarised themselves with the data by reading/re-reading and listening to the focus group recordings. The data were then analysed using a framework derived from the wider literature on peer support including constructs from Kram's (1983) model of mentoring. This model was developed for workplace mentoring but has potential currency here. It sets out two aspects of the mentoring relationship – phases and roles. The phases include initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition. The 'role' aspect focuses on the part the mentor plays during these phases and includes psychosocial and career functions. Psychosocial aspects include role modelling, counselling, and friendship whilst the career aspects include sponsorship and coaching (Kram, 1983). Initial familiarisation with the data read in conjunction with Kram's ideas resulted in a deductive analytic framework that focused on the benefits of peer support in terms of 1) practical benefit, reflecting aspects of what Kram refers to as initiation and cultivation, 2) social and emotional benefit, linking to Kram's

psychosocial function and 3) 'future' benefit, which has similarities with Kram's career function. The data were analysed with reference to these three categories. During the process of analysis it became apparent that a further category of analysis around *process* was also salient, namely, the students' perspectives on facilitating factors and challenges. These are presented as a fourth theme.

Results

1) Practical benefit

A key finding was that the peer mentor scheme had a very practical element to it, particularly in the initial stages of the mentor/mentee relationship and at beginning of the mentee's academic journey. This theme links to Kram's ideas around initiation and cultivation. Mentees felt that the mentors helped orientate them to the demands of the MSc programme as well as giving advice and information about the logistics of it:

> *"...she [the mentor] gives me very useful tips…you know, very simple but important tips and it's helped me through preparing towards the course". (Mentee)*

Mentors were able to draw on their experiences of doing the course to give advice and support around key skills such as time management, encouraging the mentees to be organised and to hand their work in on time. This was highly valued as illustrated in the next quote:

> *"When I was going through difficulty especially during my assignment I called him and he gave me guidelines on how to manage my time so that I can produce good work" (Mentee)*

This draws on the benefit of personal experience and the mentors having gone through the same process. They were also able to offer generic advice about study skills, reading widely, maintaining academic integrity and the practicalities of electronic assignment submission:

"(My mentor) was gladly happy to give me tips as to what to do to avoid plagiarising and other things about academic integrity. So all those things was kind of a help to me and it inspires me a lot to proceed with my academic work" (Mentee)

In addition, there was a practical benefit to the mentors in terms of cementing previous learning whilst supporting the mentees. This was a valued outcome for the mentors who were able to revisit their own learning and assume the role of expert in guiding the mentees enabling one mentor to:

"re-examine my previous learning…it means you have to go back to previous modules offered and then get back (to the mentee) for discussion and even as now we are now the teachers" (Mentor)

2) Social and emotional benefit

This theme resonates with Kram's 'psychosocial' role function. There was a clear and positive social and emotional impact of the mentoring relationship on the mentors and mentees. The participants viewed sharing experiences and developing relationships as *'leading to a form of social network that exposes you to lots of opportunities in life' (Mentee)*. Mentees and mentors alike spoke of making new friends and connections which was highly valued. This enabled the development of a shared identity that increased social support. A sense of community was evident:

"I feel part of a wider health promotion network of practitioners…we are no longer on our own, we are part of the larger community…it's like we are now one family" (Mentor)

There were reported benefits to the mentors in terms of improving communication skills and to the mentees in terms of increased motivation and self-confidence:

"And I think the motivation and inspiration really stands out for me. There is a lot of encouragement from her (the mentor) and every time I talk to her whether it's about a problem or I just need to someone to show me what to do she's very, very encouraging and it makes me very confident that she has some confidence in me"

(Mentee)

As shown in the previous quote, many of the mentees cited that their mentors had motivated and encouraged them. Being a mentor also motivated the mentors themselves, and increased their confidence. With reference to giving information and guidance about specific assignments a mentor commented that *"in terms of feeling good about yourself, it made me feel like you become a consultant"*. One mentor reported feeling more motivated to stay on the course because *'someone is looking up to you'*. Mentoring also helped the mentors feel an increase in self-esteem, self-efficacy and developing mastery:

"The feeling of being responsible makes you feel really good" (Mentor)

Notably some of the participants commented on the two-way nature of support within the relationship which developed as time progressed, as illustrated in the following quote:

"And so thank God for my mentee, sometimes she tends to mentor me because she will call to ask for something and I have my own issues you know and then she begins to encourage me and its great" (Mentor)

This demonstrates the mutual support that evolved in the relationships and the reciprocal nature of them. Over time emotional support also extended beyond the remit of the course to major family events such as bereavement resulting the development of some very close and supportive connections: *"she is more of a friend or a sister to me now" (Mentee)*.

3) *Future benefit*

There was evidence in the data that links to Kram's concept of career (or professional) benefit. Mentors and mentees talked about making a difference in Ghana, strengthening health promotion in the country and broadening understanding of the field. They spoke of aspirations to set up a health promotion network or association and had creative ideas around organising conferences and influencing healthy public policy highlighting the importance of being 'networked' as follows:

> *"The more networked you are the better. And so, even in terms of job opportunities and other sorts of opportunities you have a wider network now to consult and you have more people to come to your aid" (Mentor)*

This shows future professional benefit above and beyond the mentee/mentor relationship extending beyond the programme. There was also reports of increased confidence about health promotion in particular:

> *"I'm more confident with regards to health promotion activities from meeting colleagues" (Mentee)*

The development of a shared identity and being able to work together to make a difference appeared paramount and the potential for support in addressing challenges in health promotion and public health was also evident:

> *"If I'm working on maybe nutrition/malnutrition cases at my district and knowing I have a colleague who is also working on the same topic we can exchange ideas, we can also come together and draw a common programme that is going to improve the health of the people" (Mentor)*

This supports an immediate impact on a professional level revealing feelings of broadened opportunities, a greater sense of opportunity, and wider networks pointing to aspirations around the professional longevity of the relationships which had developed. There was an

optimism for the future, in being able to work together and establish a community of people with a shared understanding working together to make a difference: "*the future of this is bigger than we are seeing now*" *(Mentor)*.

4) *Facilitating and challenging factors*

Finally, the participants highlighted several facilitating and challenging factors in relation to the experiences that they had had. A number of facilitating factors were apparent such as the importance of social media in establishing and maintaining contact:

> "*I got in touch also on social media and we became friends on Facebook. She said she was a regular on Whatsapp so I could contact her on that and it was very easy*"
>
> *(Mentee)*

The formal and informal opportunities for interaction built into the face-to-face sessions were also highly valued and provided opportunities for rapport to be established: "*the socialisation also helped a lot to keep the support going*" *(Mentee)*. Specific mention was also made about the ease of communication between mentors and mentees at the outset which was facilitated by the project team.

A number of challenges were highlighted by the participants. Tight personal schedules and lack of time were cited which perhaps have more relevance older, mature, part-time students juggling many responsibilities:

> "*They [mentors] were also busy with their assignment as well as work so sometimes you will not get them*" *(Mentee)*

Managing unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentees also proved a challenge for a small number of mentors despite the existence of the group contract set out at the beginning of the process:

> *"I fully stressed just as they told us…I cannot read something…and so I will not, I*
> *dare not read your assignment, I only give you advice" (Mentor)*

However, it was also pointed out by one participant that the group contract had been beneficial: *"Yeah, it is true the ground rules have enabled us to escape some of the dangers of plagiarism" (Mentor).* The establishment of clear boundaries helped negotiation about what was acceptable within the relationship and managing expectations on both sides.

Each mentor/mentee relationship developed in its own way and the mentors/mentees worked this out between themselves but it was not always clear on both sides how things would operate:

> *"I realised that the communication interaction with our mentors was more like a one*
> *way so it's either you have a problem or you want to contact your mentor for*
> *something otherwise your mentor wouldn't call you to find out how you are faring"*
> *(Mentee)*

Discussion

The purpose of the evaluation was to explore the impact that the peer mentoring scheme had had on the mentors and mentees who had participated in it. This discussion examines the key findings in relation to the scheme's two overall aims - to build and strengthen community and collegiate identity between the two cohorts, and to enhance students' existing professional networks in public health and health promotion with a view to long term reciprocal relationships'. The facilitating and challenging factors that emerged from the evaluation data are also discussed.

A number of aspects are evident in the 'practical benefits' theme. Christie (2014) reports that mentors often de-mystify the processes and structures of the course and this was the case here as the mentors had been through the same process. The mentees also acknowledged the

importance of support from their mentors with their academic studies as in Byl *et al.*'s (2016) research. There is also some corroboration with Colvin and Ashman's (2010) findings who identified three themes in terms of benefits to the mentors – being able to support students, reapplying concepts in their own lives and developing connections. Aspects of all three themes are evident in the data from this evaluation.

Building and strengthening community

The first aim of the peer mentoring scheme was 'to build and strengthen community and collegiate identity between the two cohorts'. This aim was achieved to a large extent as demonstrated through the theme of social and emotional benefit which links to Kram's (1983) psychosocial benefits. Making new connections enabled the development of a shared identity and increased social capital for both mentors and mentees. Byl *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance of social activities for encouraging student participation and building relationships. An informal social event held for mentors and mentees at the start of the scheme provided an opportunity for students to socialise outside of the formal class schedule.

A study by Ragavan (2014), on the impact of peer mentoring in international students from diverse backgrounds, revealed a positive effect on student integration, academic performance and promoting a sense of community. Social support has been linked to positive outcomes for graduate students, including personal and academic benefits (Tompkins *et al.,* 2016). This evaluation shows that social support was a key benefit. The mentors reported improved communication and interpersonal skills and the mentees increased confidence and motivation. Abott-Anderson *et al.* (2016, p. 2) suggest that students may 'more readily identify with a student mentor who has had recent similar experiences as a student

themselves'. In this evaluation the mentees recognised that their mentors had taken the same journey and, for example, could advise about time management from experience.

The mutual benefits shown in this study are acknowledged by Beltman and Shaeben (2012, cited in Egege, 2015) who point out the reciprocal nature of the mentor/mentee relationship. However, this type of mutual support is not an overwhelming feature of findings in the wider literature and this finding may be due to the fact that the majority of the students in both cohorts on this programme were mature adults in employment with family responsibilities. Emotional support extended beyond the course to major family life events such as bereavement.

Enhancing existing and future networks

The second aim of the peer mentoring scheme was 'to enhance students'' existing professional networks in public health and health promotion with a view to long term reciprocal relationships'. Whilst the longer term impact cannot be judged at this point there was evidence in the data that links to Kram's (1985) construct of professional or career benefit conceptualised as 'future benefit'. The development of a shared identity and of belonging appeared to be paramount and this has been highlighted in the literature as important for student retention and progression (Matheson and Sutcliffe, 2018). This supports an immediate impact on a professional level revealing broadened opportunities, a greater sense of opportunity and mutual support, and wider networks.

Facilitating and Challenging Factors

A number of facilitating and challenging factors emerged. The use of social media was a key facilitating factor. Likewise, Byl *et al.* (2016) found that Facebook was a useful contact tool. This is worth commenting on because the mentor/mentee relationship in this context was not a 'traditional mentoring relationship (which is) created and nurtured by frequent face-to-face

contact' (Scandura and Pellegrini, 2007, p.13). Notably social media did not exist when Kram (1983, 1985) developed her mentoring model.

The group contract supported the mentor/mentee relationship. The literature highlights the importance of establishing clear boundaries (Egege, 2015). The participants referred to the way the scheme was set up as being '*facilitative*'. They were introduced to each other via email. Consequently, specific mention was made about ease of communication between mentors and mentees at the outset. In addition, the opportunity to meet formally and informally during the two week induction period for the second cohort helped facilitate interaction.

Similarly to Abbott-Anderson *et al.*'s (2016) findings, time was a challenge. The mentors had to manage their own time effectively and support their mentees simultaneously. There were some unrealistic mentee expectations around sharing of assignments. This marries with Colvin and Ashman's (2010) claim that mentors and mentees have different expectations about the mentor's role and what they should be doing. Christie (2014) notes potential difficulties related to boundaries particularly around academic work which was noted here, despite the existence of the group contract.

In addition to Kram's (1985) two roles (psycho-social and career) there was strong indication that this peer mentor scheme served a practical function particularly in the early stages. Data from this study shows that peer mentoring has enhanced the transition of the mentees into post-graduate study and into the field of health promotion.

Limitations

Despite the relative success of this peer mentoring scheme there are some limitations. Firstly, the part-time structure of the MSc programme is relatively unique and lends itself to a peer mentor scheme unlike one year, full time Masters' programmes. Secondly, the longer term

impact of the programme cannot yet be established. It would be interesting to revisit the mentors and mentees in five and ten years' time to determine any longer term outcomes. Thirdly, contrary to other findings in the literature, there did not appear to be any evidence in this study of dysfunctional mentoring relationships (Scandura and Pellegrini, 2007). It is plausible, however, that some of the participants had experienced such and were reluctant to disclose this. Finally, it stands to reason that Kram's (1983, 1985) Model of Mentoring falls short in terms of providing a framework for conceptualising mentoring in post-graduate education given when it was developed and that it centred on workplace mentoring. However, it does have some utility as discussed. Further qualitative research on peer mentoring could provide the basis for the development of a new model of mentoring that is more specific to the higher education. It is also recommended that more evaluation work is done in this area to develop understanding about what works in the post-graduate context.

In conclusion, this evaluation provides an opportunity to extend understanding of the mentor role in relation to the postgraduate transition and a low-middle income country context, about which relatively little has been published. The evaluation shows that, by way of an innovative pedagogical design, this peer mentoring scheme achieved a highly valuable educational experience for relatively little input. The scheme eased the transition into postgraduate learning for the mentees as well as bringing numerous benefits to them and to their mentors including the development of a shared sense of identity and community.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

Nothing to be declared.

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