

Reflection of Academic Mentoring - A Service-Learning Project Experience

Amelia Binte Mohamad Ali¹, Amanda Chiam Hui Juin², Nurhuda Binte Ibrahim³

¹ Bachelor of Social Work, Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore

Email address: ameliaali97@outlook.sg

² Bachelor of Accounting, Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore

Email address: amandachj@hotmail.com

³ Bachelor of Social Work, Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore

Email address: nurhuda.ibrahim97@gmail.com

Abstract:

1. Introduction

Project Learn, Love, Live was established in September 2014 as an academic mentoring Service-Learning (S-L) initiative, aimed to address the social-economic gap in Singapore with education being a social enabler because education, as asserted by Singapore's education minister, Mr Ong Ye Kung, education continues to be a significant strategy in enabling social mobility (Mokhtar, 2018). More importantly, we believe that we are in the best position to provide social-emotional support to the students as we have shared a common experience in our adolescence.

Under the guidance of the school's mentor, we first identified the needs of the community through interviews and interactions with the various Voluntary Welfare Organisations in Singapore. Amongst them, Pertapis Education & Welfare Centre was chosen as our beneficiary. Apart from supporting lower income families on their daily needs through food rations, Pertapis

believed in providing academic support to the children of these families to facilitate financial independence in the future.

During the initial phase, with only five mentees each receiving weekly one-to-one mentorship, we explored mentees' academic needs, familiarised ourselves with the school curriculum and established rapport with the mentees. Gradually, we gained mentees' trust and were able to learn more about their family background and the reasons for their lack of motivation in their studies.

Over the years, the project has developed beyond just providing academic mentorship. We have been looking into ways to strengthen our project, such as by organising events or activities to foster the bond between students and parents and conducting motivational workshops to increase students' self-confidence and strengthen mentor-mentee relationship. After four years of running this project, the number of active mentors has reached a steady state of thirty, providing mentorship to over forty mentees ranging from 7 to 16 years old.

2. Literature Review

Academic mentoring programmes aim to reduce the achievement gaps experienced by students who face conditions of environmental risks and/or individual level risks by facilitating their personal and professional development (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine & Cooper, 2002; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh & McMaken, 2011). This is achieved through a positive and mutually beneficial partnership, involving the mentor – a more experienced and reliable individual – and the mentee – a young person who wants and needs a caring, more experienced person in his/her life (DuBois et al., 2002; Lee, Krauss, Suandi & Hamzah, 2016). Within a mentoring relationship, learning occurs through the mutual exchange of knowledge between mentor and

mentee. Mentees take charge of learning through facilitation, guidance and counselling provided by mentors. Similarly, mentees provide valuable resources to the mentor that facilitates mentors' self-awareness, personal and professional development (Brewer, 2016; Lee et al., 2016).

Mentoring have been shown to promote social and emotional well-being and cognitive development of young people, contributing to successful outcomes such as student motivation, academic competence and behavioural adjustments (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang & Noam, 2006), and these outcomes are strongly associated with the duration and quality of mentor-mentee relationship (DuBois et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006).

3. Methods/Analysis

Over the course of the S-L project, we have looked beyond solely focusing on academics and have been working towards achieving a holistic mentoring programme. We continuously reflect on the effectiveness of our programme and seek ways to strengthen the relationship between our mentees and mentors. In order to obtain a more comprehensive perspective of our project, both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained via questionnaires. Mentors' reflections after their one-year mentorship were also utilised to supplement our qualitative data.

3.1. Mentees' Questionnaire

The objective of the mentees' questionnaire was to measure their general satisfaction and happiness with the mentorship, the perceived level of trust between mentees and mentors, and the perceived guidance from mentors in helping them cope. The questionnaire is adapted from The Youth–Mentor Relationship Questionnaire, a validated relationship quality assessment tool to measure the effectiveness of mentoring programmes (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman & Grossman, 2005). All items were measured on a 4-point Likert scale (Not At All True, Slightly True, Quite

True and Very True or Never, Hardly Ever, Sometimes, Often). Example of items include “My mentor makes me believe that I can achieve my goals” and “I look forward to seeing my mentor”.

3.2. Mentors’ Questionnaire

The mentor’s questionnaire sought to explore mentors’ perception on how beneficial the mentorship has been for them in terms of shaping their values and empowering them. For the mentorship to be effective, a strong mentor-mentee relationship must be established and both mentors and mentees have a part to play in that. All items were also measured on a 4-point Likert scale (Not At All True, Slightly True, Quite True and Very True). Example of items include “I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself” and “I am genuinely concerned about the particular child I am mentoring”.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Mentees

We obtained 21 responses from our current mentees. Data analysis generated an overall positive mentor-mentee relationship.

Mentees were generally satisfied with their mentors. Majority agreed that they like their mentors (90.4%) and look forward to seeing their mentor every week (85.7%). Generally, mentees felt an absence of negative emotions when interacting with the mentor - majority agreed to feeling excited (76.2%), happy (95.2%) and important (76.2%) when with their mentor and more than 90% of mentees find that their mentors make them feel more confident of their abilities to achieve their goals. Mentees also generally perceive their mentors as accommodating - more than 85% agreed that mentors consider and do what they want to do during the sessions.

However, there were mixed responses about mentees’ perceived ability to talk to their mentors about their feelings (38%: “Slightly true”; 33%: “Quite true”). Majority also feel that

their mentors occasionally pay attention when they share what makes them unhappy (64.3%: “Sometimes”) and occasionally make them feel better when they are feeling unhappy (76.2%: “Sometimes).

4.2. Mentors

23 responses were gathered from our mentors. Most expressed their willingness in spending their free time to be mentors as they genuinely want to help their mentees (65.2%: Very True). Additionally, mentors generally agree that mentoring helps facilitate their personal and professional development. Specifically, they are able to learn more about the cause they are working for (78.3%: Very True) and gain new perspectives beyond providing help to the mentees (69.6%: Very True). One mentor reflected that “Seeing how a mentee's attitude towards learning changed in response to being with a different mentor made (her) realise the impact (mentors) have on these kids”. Another expressed that “Although (mentees’) socio-economic status may place them at a disadvantage, (they) still strive and do their best in their academics to make their parents proud.” Mentors also agreed that contributing their strengths through mentorship empowers them as they are able to contribute their strengths (43.5%: “Very True”).

However, mentors expressed that challenges faced affects the strength of their relationship with their mentees. For example, some mentors mentioned that they have trouble ensuring their mentees remain focused and motivated during mentoring sessions. Mentors also voiced their lack of ability in providing the best advice to mentees’ expressed problems.

4.3. Mentors’ Reflections

As part of the school curriculum, mentors were tasked to reflect on their experience upon completion of a year of mentorship. The pioneer group of mentors who had been through the challenging phase of this project shared that “not everyone will understand our intent towards it

and we should not get discouraged and lose hope”. Another mentor whom have been with us for four years expressed that “I have learnt that being a mentor does not mean that I am always in the position to give but rather, I have learnt that I have received more than I have given. These students have taught me values such humility and being grateful for what they have.”

5. Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate promising results - mentees generally perceive their relationship with their mentor to be positive, while mentors generally perceive that the mentoring programme has been beneficial for them. Additionally, it is noteworthy to mention that despite the varied duration of mentorship (ranging from three months to more than a year), the quality of mentor-mentee relationship is generally positive.

Nevertheless, there is a limitation to our study. The number of mentees who participated in our study (n=21) was only approximately half of total current number and their answers may not reflect the answers of other mentees who did not participate in our study.

Despite the limitation, our findings allowed us to identify the areas that have impacted the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship and overall, reflect on the effectiveness of our mentoring programme.

As the number of mentors and mentees grow, we will be faced with challenges that demand different solutions. Thus, we continually work towards improving our programme by identifying and addressing these challenges faced by both mentors and mentees.

Currently, with the support of the school, workshops such as “Working Effectively with Children and Youth” are being conducted for our mentors to better equip them with the skills required for effective mentorship. We will continue to work towards our goal of inspiring and

motivating mentees by enhancing our mentorship and incorporating more events and activities to facilitate mentees' academic progress and socioemotional wellbeing.

Keywords: Academic Mentoring, Service-Learning, Impact, Student Reflections

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Biographical sketch of each presenter

Please send the biographical sketch of the presenters together with the proposal using the following format:

Presenter 1:



Chiam Hui Juin, Amanda

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Bachelor of Accountancy, Singapore

A graduate from SUSS, Amanda credits her university for nurturing her passion in Service- Learning and given her the opportunity to be the Co-Founder of Project Learn, Love, Live in 2014. Although she has moved on to her career in Audit, she continues to mentor her juniors and finds time to contribute back to the society in any way possible as she believes that “ A little effort goes a long way”.

Email: amandachj@hotmail.com

Website: <https://amandachj.wixsite.com/e-portfolio>

Presenter 2:



Surat'man, Lydia Erdinnie

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Undergraduate, Singapore

Lydia has been involved in teaching since 2015. She pursued in a diploma in Early Childhood Education to widen her knowledge in that field. Now an undergraduate majoring in Social Work, she fuels her passion through teaching students from various challenging backgrounds.

Email: lydiasuratman@gmail.com

Presenter 3:



Zainudin, Umairah Farzana

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Undergraduate, Singapore

I have always been keen to teach kids especially those from a more vulnerable background as I am a true advocate for education and believe in education for all. Due to that, I spend a gap year working at a student care for low income families and assist them in their schoolwork and come up with curriculum for their education progress. With this passion, I am now majoring in Social Work to do more to advocate for children who are not able to access proper or better education.

Email: umairah0212@gmail.com

Presenter 4:



Omar, Ahmad Idris

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Undergraduate, Singapore

Ahmad has given tuition to younger children ever since his A level-days. Bringing about a positive, passionate demeanour in his teaching, he believes that every student deserves learning in a fun and joyful manner to motivate them to excel in their studies. As a member of the Service Learning programme, he hopes to further enhance his qualities both as a teacher and mentor to guide his students towards holistic excellence in their education.

Email: ahmadibo1994@gmail.com