Applying Social Justice Principles to a Peer Mentoring Scheme for Foundation Students

CHRISTINA DELISTATHI
University of Westminster

This paper explores the application of social justice principles as cornerstones in the design and planning of a peer mentoring scheme for foundation students at an English university aimed at assisting transition to HE and at fostering belonging to university. Starting from the specific needs of students and institutional priorities, it provides examples of how the social justice principles of a) meeting student needs, b) equity and c) participation in a safe community can be strategically operationalised to support students. They have been applied in relation to the scope of the scheme; to removing barriers that inhibit scheme membership and support the dissemination of participant knowledge; and to the processes and partnerships between groups that sustain the scheme and help create a safe community. The discussion extends our understanding of the contexts of application of social justice principles. It is hoped that it can be useful to other mentoring schemes and initiatives to support students and, more broadly, to advance the social justice agenda.

Introduction

Peer mentoring schemes have been widely implemented in universities both in the UK and elsewhere as a means of enhancing first year students' experience (Carragher and McGaughey, 2016, p. 2). Given their position as strategic components of a positive student experience, it is perhaps inevitable that scholarly enquiry has focused mostly on the evaluation of schemes (McMillan and Parker, 2005) and their efficacy in relation to student outcomes, such as well-being (Carragher and McGaughey, 2016) career-related benefits (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019), transition to HE (Hall and Jaugietis, 2011; Andrews and Clark, 2011; Ros and Reddy, 2007) or the relationship between mentoring and academic success (Rodger and Tremblay, 2003). These studies have established the value of mentoring in diverse contexts and local circumstances in relation to broader institutional objectives and priorities, e.g., to promote inclusivity and academic progress.

Research from a social justice perspective has also highlighted the effectiveness of mentoring in HE for academic success and societal change at different study levels. Used for diverse purposes, mentoring has been seen as a mechanism to develop cultural competences

among doctoral students (Heppner, 2017), to transfer knowledge in teacher training (Pleschová and McAlpine, 2015) or to train future counselling psychologists (Neville, 2015). However, detailed discussions of social justice principles in schemes for first year students are few and appear absent in relation to foundation year programmes. Rawlinson and Willimott (2016) incorporate principles of social justice with strategies of learning centredness in a first-year undergraduate student cohort. They explore mentoring embedded in a core module taught in a number of study programmes to demonstrate the implementation of social justice principles through enhancement of mentors' expert knowledge, communication strategies and continuous evaluation of these strategies. As will be discussed, our study shares Rawlinson and Willimott's concerns and we have adapted their approach to match our scheme's priorities.

This paper draws attention to social justice principles applied during the design and planning of a mentoring scheme for foundation students at an English university and discusses the ways these principles shaped the vision of the scheme and its organisation. The discussion affords an understanding of how such principles can be put into practice to respond to social inequalities and shape mentoring schemes and, more broadly, interventions to support students. Specifically, the paper will outline the principles underpinning our mentoring scheme and examine how they became a compass in decision-making during its inception. The discussion will, firstly, summarise the rationale and purpose of our mentoring scheme, secondly, it will introduce the concept of social justice and the corresponding principles of meeting student needs, equity and participation in a safe community, and, finally, it will provide examples of areas of application of these principles.

Mentoring at the University

Diverse contexts of operation have brought about a variety of types of mentoring schemes together with a variety of definitions. For the purposes of this discussion, mentoring will be considered a relationship "in which an individual with more expertise provides knowledge and information to a less experienced individual" (Peyton *et al.*, 2001, p. 351). Foregrounding experience and one-to-one interaction is apt here because our scheme envisages the mentoring relationship taking place between two people and utilises the knowledge of the more senior one.

The University is a post-92 institution with a sizable foundation year across diverse subject areas, such as Arts and Media, Law, Life and Social Sciences, Computer Science, and Business Studies. The current provision has been running for four years and has attracted mostly UK-based, female, 18-year-old students with a BAME background. During the academic year 2021-22, we ran a pilot mentoring scheme. Its purpose, which responds to institutional priorities of student retention and belonging, was twofold: a) to assist incoming foundation students' transition to higher education through informal peer-to-peer learning, where mentors pass on their experience of university study to new students; and b) to foster connectedness with and belonging to the University for both mentors and mentees, by creating opportunities for them to meet and interact with each other. Approaching staff for advice may feel uncomfortable or even intimidating for some new students and can increase feelings of inadequacy. Instead, enlisting senior students through a mentoring scheme "takes advantage of their ability to share their own recent experiences as students, and thus the process does not involve the status differences that may exist between faculty and students" (Hall and Jaugietis, 2011, p. 41-42). By avoiding pressures created by inequality and hierarchy, interactions between peers can, instead, facilitate acculturation in the university.

The scheme is an extracurricular activity where both mentors and mentees volunteer their time and apply to participate. Mentors are former foundation students who have progressed to Level 4. Mentoring sessions are face-to-face and are arranged via email exchange initiated

by the mentor. Mentees are the current year's foundations students who have expressed the need for a mentor. Mentors and mentees are matched from the same study programme. For the mentors, the advantage of a programme-matched mentoring relationship is that their experience from having studied the same programme creates empathy and understanding for the mentee's sentiments; for the mentee, it generates confidence in the advice received and a sense of security, which are central to the scheme.

To oversee operations, there is a Management Team consisting of the Director of Foundation Pathways and the Mentoring Scheme Coordinator who matches mentors with mentees, supports both groups, and promotes the scheme. Underlying its creation is an institutional commitment to foundation provision and to supporting transition; on this basis, funding was released for the Coordinator's post. The scheme runs mostly in the first and second term. In total, seven one-hour-long mentoring sessions are required, taking place every four weeks, resulting in three sessions per term with a final one in the first week of the third term, just before the start of the exam period. The timing of the sessions roughly corresponds with key times in the academic year, that is, beginning of term, first coursework deadlines, end of term one and final coursework deadlines in term two. In each term a social event is organised to bring all participants together. The scheme has been evaluated through a questionnaire given to participants in the second term, and a focus group at the end of the academic year.

The scheme has been set up to address specific needs of foundation students as identified in student feedback and relevant research. For example, it is widely known that many foundation students come from underprivileged backgrounds and often experience a lack of entitlement to HE (Dunn and Faulkner, 2020; Marshall, 2016). They do not consider themselves adequately prepared for or capable of university study, and often feel disconnected from the institution. Their presence in the university is under threat (Garnett and Huber, 2018, p. 17). However, connectedness with the university is an established element of student academic success (Yomtov *et al.*, 2017, p. 26), so encouraging community creation and bonds between students is important in creating feelings of connectedness and belonging. Mentoring schemes are interventions proven to aid transition (Hall and Jaugietis, 2011, p. 41) and to create feelings of belonging (Sanchez *et al.*, 2006). These difficulties that foundation students experience have been amplified by the effects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Our foundation students are mostly BAME and female and these are some of the groups which have been impacted particularly negatively and intensely by the pandemic (HM Government, 2020). Students have reported numerous challenges relating to COVID, such as increased anxiety and other mental health issues, as well as financial and family problems, and overcrowded living conditions. After consultation with foundation students, mentoring emerged as an appropriate intervention to support them within the context of institutional priorities and resources. As these challenges stem from social inequalities, an adequate response requires a social justice outlook and the application of social justice principles. It is not argued here that the scheme is an application of social justice education, but that it is an effort in that direction.

Social Justice Principles

Although understandings of social justice are diverse and contingent on cultural and other contextual factors, the concept itself provides a unifying framework between practice and motivations (Shriberg and Clinton, 2016, p. 324). Social justice refers here to the ''full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (Bell, 2013, p. 21). Several principles can be identified, such as inclusivity, mutuality, equitable access to resources and well-being. For the

purposes of this discussion three overarching principles will be discussed, which derive from the above definition, and have directly influenced the design of the scheme: (i) meeting the needs of foundation students, (ii) equity, and (iii) participation in a safe community.

Meeting the needs of foundation students relates to the purpose of the scheme and it is operationalised by providing the opportunity to gain entry to the mentoring community. Equity refers to removing barriers that inhibit participation in the community, and involves both setting appropriate expectations from participants, and utilising and disseminating mentors' knowledge as a valuable resource. Participation in a safe community involves processes and partnerships that encourage student membership in the scheme, help create a safe community and disseminate knowledge about constructing such community. A detailed discussion of the application of these principles is the topic of the next sections.

Meeting Student Needs: Purpose of the Scheme

As mentioned earlier, the scheme was set up to ease adjustment to university and to promote participation by fostering a sense of community and belonging. So, it focuses on both academic and psychological outcomes (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021). Starting with the socio-economic challenges to transition as outlined in a previous section, the scheme aims to generate an inclusive and caring space where everyone's needs and well-being are considered. The university can be seen as a compassionate place rather than an alienating institution. Joining the scheme is based on choice, by participants who wish to contribute to it and are willing to engage and interact respectfully with each other, where foundation students become more vis-ible in the university and their voices heard.

For mentors, joining the scheme is an occasion for reflection on how to communicate their learning experiences thoughtfully and in non-judgmental ways. For mentees, it is an opportunity to join this new community because they are new students who may be apprehensive at this point in their studies, and not because they are weak, lacking or flawed or in need of additional support. The scheme is not a community where imposter feelings are reaffirmed and propagated by emphasising the need for assistance nor does it replace the work of academic or professional personnel. No formal teaching of academic skills or disciplinary content or help with coursework takes place during the mentoring sessions. Our commitment to high quality education means that students are taught by highly qualified, experienced staff who are experts in their fields. So, the mentoring scheme is an additional layer in the institution's provision for foundation students; it does not replace existing staff.

These concerns shape the required attributes of prospective participants, and this is reflected in the information given during the scheme's promotion. To reach potential mentors, a member of the Management Team visits a lecture to introduce and explain the scheme, and a promotional video is created to aid this, emphasising the qualities of empathy, respect and willingness to help. Past academic performance is not considered relevant in the selection of mentors; instead, they need to be sympathetic listeners and committed to sharing their experience from university study. The benefits of the scheme for mentors are personal growth through emotional satisfaction and increased confidence by helping others, and by reflecting on their own learning journey. A set of acquirable transferable skills is also identified (e.g., organisational, networking and communication skills) that can be used to enhance their own professsional profile. Although considerations such as employability are relevant, a conscious decision has been made to rank them as secondary, prioritising empathy and respect.

To recruit mentees, a promotional video is shown to new students, which approaches mentoring as a way of stimulating personal and academic development. Mentees benefit from accessing mentors' learning tips and, most of all, benefit from meeting a sympathetic listener and a friendly face with an encouraging attitude. Mentees expand their social and support

network and gain confidence knowing how senior students confronted the same challenges. A stronger sense of partnership between students is formed as a result, nurturing a sense of community and belonging.

Equity: Removing Barriers to Participation in the Community

Applying social justice principles entails a "careful consideration of the unique backgrounds and experiences" that mentors and mentees bring to the mentoring relationship (Albright, Hurd, and Hussain, 2017, p. 364). So, enabling participation in the community of mentoring involves, firstly, an understanding of the lives of students who often juggle numerous commitments beyond university. Particular care is given to prevent excessive or unnecessary demands on mentors and mentees, during both the scheme's application process and their contribution to the scheme.

To this effect, the application process is designed to be uncomplicated and brief. It involves filling in an online form (which can be accessed through the promotional material), requiring applicants to provide only information directly relevant to the scheme and a personal statement with their reasons for wishing to join. Appreciating the demands on student time and being mindful not to overload mentors with a high number of mentees, mentors are given the choice of the number of mentees in their charge, with a maximum of three. If a mentor chooses to have only one mentee (as was often the case), this is respected and acknowledged as a valuable input; no contribution is too small.

Secondly, removing barriers to participation in the community of mentoring requires promoting, developing and disseminating diverse knowledges (Rawlinson and Willimott, 2016, p. 46). An exchange of knowledge takes place during the mentoring sessions, where mentors draw on their institutional and experiential knowledge. They reflect on how best to communicate with their mentees, recalling their own circumstances as new students. They convey their learning suggestions, their experience of what has been a successful approach to study and what has been ineffective and should not be repeated. For example, they explain how to deal with multiple coursework deadlines or respond to questions such as "should I still go into the class if I arrive late?" as one mentee asked. They also share their institutional knowledge to direct mentees to appropriate resources or expert help if it is needed.

Such interactions stimulate mentor reflection not only about how this knowledge has been generated, but also how it is applied in the new context of mentoring. Mentees are informed of appropriate academic practice and reflect on their own learning journey and approaches to study. This increases their own confidence and independence in navigating university requirements and resources, and promotes self-development and self-reliance. By providing opportunities for learning and reflection for both mentee and mentor, mentoring becomes a mutually developmental relationship (Woloshyn *et al.*, 2019) where student knowledge is valued, advanced and circulated.

Participation in a Safe Community: Processes and Partnerships

Central to enabling the creation of a safe community for both mentors and mentees is to put processes in place that prepare them adequately for their responsibilities. For mentees, an information sheet is provided to clarify obligations and define expectations, whereas mentors are supported through compulsory training. This involves completing three workshops after which they are formally accepted in the scheme. The first workshop, delivered by the Management Team, elaborates on the obligations and limits of mentors' remit. The remaining two workshops, in accordance with social justice tenets, seek to extend mentors' appreciation and understanding of diversity and inclusivity, and promote bonding, respect and acceptance within the mentoring community (Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2020, p. 72). To attend to respectful and em-

pathic interactions, one workshop develops the theme of active listening; the other expands on different (dis)abilities, their effects on study and on using appropriate language to discuss these.

Awareness of language that does not discriminate assists mentors in responding thoughtfully and confidently to mentees who may disclose personal and sensitive information, such as a disability or health issues, and to signpost them to relevant services if required. To ensure that appropriate and high-quality training is offered that emphasises the well-being of participants and a positive learning environment, both these last workshops are taught by experts in these areas of work. The (dis)abilities workshop is delivered by the Academic Engagement and Development Manager with a specialisation on accessibility, and the workshop on listening by a counsellor. Mentors and mentees are further supported by the Mentoring Scheme Coordinator who ensures a timely and appropriate response to any issues or questions arising.

Creating a safe community places the development of partnerships at centre stage. Learning from each other and sharing experience is an essential component of professional and personal growth for all participants (Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2020, p. 79). Three types of partnerships are created through the scheme: the first two are formed between mentors and mentees, and between these groups and the Management Team. The term-time events mentioned earlier, bring mentors, mentees and Management Team together and provide opportunities for students to reflect on their experience from mentoring, and to shape and remodel the scheme through inclusive practices (Rawlinson and Willimott, 2016), such as discussions, activities and games (Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2020, p. 75). The different modes of participation encourage involvement while respecting individual preferences and differentiated needs, and give the opportunity to all those present to contribute (Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2020, p. 75). They also introduce a retreat from the initial top-down model, essential to setting up the scheme, and a move towards a more participatory, mutually-shaped and student-led arrangement.

The third type of partnership has already been formed between staff while designing the mentors' training workshops as discussed above. Additionally, much of the thinking process during planning has been stimulated by discussions with colleagues across the university who have been running different mentoring schemes with diverse purposes. For example, colleagues in the Careers and Employability Service have been invaluable in sharing their experience from an employability-focused scheme, such as identifying the optimal time for the mentor training, and dealing with potential pitfalls and challenges. Discussing e-mentoring with a colleague in Psychology afforded an altogether different perspective, drawing attention to boundaries and expectations of the mentor's role, and prompted a more in-depth reflection on the purpose of the scheme.

These partnerships have underscored the significance of integrating the scheme with other initiatives and provisions (Jones and Smith, 2022, p. 11), such as those offered by the University's professional services and this is an ongoing discussion. As importantly, they have enriched our scheme, opening up new lanes of cooperation between staff, generating new ideas and helping to develop more affirmative ways of supporting students. Some of these partnerships have been consolidated into more permanent collaborations, involving a continuous dialogue and exchange of ideas about mentoring. So, while we have been running the scheme, university counsellors who support foundation students direct those who state that they could benefit from a mentor to our scheme, extending its reach and creating more integrated and multifaceted student support structures. At the time of writing, the scheme had its first evaluation. Initial feedback indicates that both mentors and mentees have benefitted from it and that it has helped their attachment to the University to grow. Applying principles of social justice has assisted in creating a scheme that has enhanced student involvement and has been rewarding to all participants, mentors, mentees and staff.

Conclusion

This discussion extends the contexts of application of social justice principles, which underpin the design of a peer mentoring scheme for foundation students at the University. Specifically, the principles of meeting student needs, equity, and participation in a safe community have been strategically operationalised to create a scheme aimed at assisting adjustment to HE and at fostering belonging to university. The application of the principles relates to the scope of the scheme, to removing barriers that inhibit membership and utilise and disseminate student knowledges, and to processes and partnerships between different groups that sustain and enrich the scheme and benefit both student and staff participants. Looking to the future, it is hoped that this example can make a positive contribution to efforts towards adopting principles of social justice in mentoring schemes and more broadly in interventions to support students, and towards promoting the social justice agenda.

Acknowledgments

References

Albright, J. N., Hurd, N. M., and Hussain, S. B. (2017). Applying a Social Justice Lens to Youth Mentoring: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Practice. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 59*, 363-381.

Andrews, J., and Clark, R. (2011). Peer Mentoring Works! How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in Higher Education. The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved July 15, 2022, from https://publications.aston.ac.uk/id/eprint/17969/1/ASTON_PEER_MENTORING_EVALUATION_TOOL_KIT.COPY.pdf.

Bell, L. A. (2013). Theoretical foundations. In,. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, H. C. Castaneda, M. L. Peters, and X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 21–26). New York: Routledge.

Carragher, J., and McGaughey, J. (2016). The effectiveness of peer mentoring in promoting a positive transition to higher education for first-year undergraduate students: a mixed methods systematic review protocol. *Systematic Reviews, 5*(1), 1-9.

Dunn, R., and Faulkner, S. (2020). Selling themselves short: How inclusive is the UCAS application process to non-traditional students? *Journal of the Foundation Year Network, 3*, 43-56.

Garnett, J. M., and Huber, G. W. (2018). What is your social justice IQ: leading social justice in Higher Education. *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education, Special Issue: Socio-Political Issues in Education, 3*(1), 15-22.

Hall, R., and Jaugietis, Z. (2011). Developing Peer Mentoring Through Evaluation. *Innovative Higher Education, 36*, 41–52.

Hamilton, L., Boman, J., Rubin, H., and Sahota, B. (2019). Examining the Impact of a University Mentorship Program on Student Outcomes. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 8*(1), 19-36.

Hatzichristou, C., Lampropoulou, A., and Lianos, P. (2020). Social Justice Principles as core concepts in School Psychology Training, Research and Practice at a Transnational Level. *School Psychology International, 41*(1), 67-86.

Heppner, P. P. (2017). Creating mentoring opportunities to promote cultural competences and social justice. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*(1), 137–157.

HM Government. (2020, November 30). Analysis of the health, economic and social effects of COVID-19 and the approach to tiering. UK. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944823/Analysis_of_the_health_economic_and_social_effects_of_COVID-19_and_the_approach_to_tiering_FINAL_-_accessible_v2.pdf.

Jones, J., and Smith, H. (2022). A comparative study of formal coaching and mentoring programmes in higher education. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 11*(2), 213-231.

Marshall, C. A. (2016). Stories with a Foundation. In C. A. Marshall, S. J. Nolan, and D. P. Newton, *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students* (pp. 179-188). London: Palgrave.

McMillan, W., and Parker, M. E. (2005). 'Quality is Bound Up With Our Values': evaluating the quality of mentoring programmes. *Quality in Higher Education, 11*(2), 151-160.

Miles, A. (2015). The (re)genesis of values: Examining the importance of values for action. *American Sociological Review, 80*(4), 680–704.

Mullen, C. A., and Klimaitis, C. C. (2021). Defining mentoring: a literature review of issues, types, and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences. Special Issue: Mentoring: Theoretical Background, Empirical Findings, and Practical Applications, 1483*, 19–35.

Neville, H. (2015). Social Justice Mentoring: Supporting the Development of Future Leaders for Struggle, Resistance, and Transformation. *The Counseling Psychologist, 43*(1), 157-169.

Peyton, A., Morton, M., Perkins, M., and Dougherty, L. (2001). Mentoring in Gerontology Education: New Graduate Student Perspectives. *Educational Gerontology, 27*, 347–359.

Pleschová, G., and McAlpine, L. (2015). Enhancing university teaching and learning through mentoring: A systematic review of the literature . *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 4*(2), 107-125.

Rawlinson, C., and Willimott, M. (2016). Social justice, learning centredness, and a first year experience peer mentoring program: how might they connect? *Journal of Peer Learning, 9*, 41–48.

Rodger, S., and Tremblay, P. F. (2003). The effects of a peer mentoring program on academic success among first year university students. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 33*(3), 1–18.

Ros, H., and Reddy, P. (2007). Undergraduate peer mentoring: an investigation into processes, activities and outcomes. *Psychology Learning and Teaching, 6*(2), 98-103.

Sanchez, R. J., Bauer, T. N., and Paronto, M. E. (2006). Peer-mentoring freshmen: Implications for satisfaction, commitment, and retention to graduation. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 5*(1), 25–37.

Shriberg, D., and Clinton, A. (2016). The Application of Social Justice Principles to Global School Psychology Practice. *School Psychology International, 37*(4), 323–339.

Woloshyn, V., Savage, M., Ratkovic, S., Hands, C., and Martinovic, D. (2019). Exploring Professors' Experiences Spporting Graduate Student Well-being in Ontario Faculties of Education. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 8* (4), 397-411.

Yomtov, D., Plunkett, S. W., Efrat, R., and Garcia Marin, A. (2017). Can peer mentors improve first-year experiences of university students? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 19*(1), 25–44.

About the Author

Dr Christina Delistathi is a Principal Lecturer and Director of the University of Westminster Foundation Pathways, where she has been overseeing its foundation provision since 2018. Her educational research focuses on historical aspects of education by volunteers and on interventions to advance social justice for minoritised social groups.
Email: c.delistathi@westminster.ac.uk

Page left blank