An Evaluation of a Student-led Mentorship Programme in a New Zealand School of Nursing

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Abstract

**Aim.** To report a qualitative study that evaluated the implementation of an inaugural student-led mentorship programme in a New Zealand School of Nursing by capturing Mentorship Programme Leaders, Mentors and Mentees stories guided by a narrative enquiry.

**Background.** Five, year three nursing students implemented a student-led mentorship programme to provide guidance and support to new nursing students in the School of Nursing at the Southern Institute of Technology. New nursing students to the institute were invited to join the programme during orientation week at the commencement of the academic year. The Mentorship Programme Leaders then matched Mentors with Mentees.

The two purposes of the student-led mentorship programme were to foster better communication and community between students to reduce stress and anxiety, essentially helping to improve a sense of belonging. The second was an opportunity for Mentorship Programme Leaders and Mentors to improve their intangible skills of communication and leadership.

**Design.** Guided by a narrative enquiry research approach the Mentorship Programme Leaders, Mentors and Mentees individually completed two questions developed by the researchers using the electronic learning platform, Blackboard in the final two weeks of the 2019 academic year. The analysis reorganised these stories into a framework called re-storying by initially focusing on structural components followed by content level extracting predominant experiences expressed within and between the participants stories.

**Results.** The Mentorship Programme Leaders, Mentors and Mentees stories expressed the success of this programme. Mentees identified this programme had contributed to positive experiences with reduced anxiety while enabling a sense of belonging. The Mentors and Mentorship Programme Leaders’ stories articulated improved intangible skills of communication, problem solving and leadership.

**Conclusion.** The success narrated by the Mentorship Programme Leaders, Mentors and Mentees validates the continuation of this programme.

**Keywords**
mentorship; nursing students; intangible skills; narrative enquiry; belonging
Background

Numerous factors can influence nursing students entering tertiary study for the first time (Hendry et al., 2020). Nursing students in their first year of tertiary study often express apprehension and a lack confidence (Foxwell et al., 2017; Rohatinsky et al., 2017; Yomtov et al., 2017). Five, year three nursing students met formally with the Head of School of Nursing at the beginning of the 2019 academic year seeking support to implement a student-led mentorship programme at the Southern Institute of Technology School of Nursing. A student-led mentorship programme is where students support and foster better communication and community between each other with the intention to reduce stress and anxiety and improve their sense of belonging. A student-led mentorship programme also provides an opportunity for Mentorship Programme Leaders and Mentors to improve the intangible skills of communication and leadership (Bulut et al., 2010; Mault et al., 2019; Ssemata et al., 2017).

The proposed initiative of implementing a student-led mentorship programme followed informal conversations the year three nursing students had regarding their appreciation of support they had received from cohorts ahead of them when they began the nursing programme. Their encounters of informal support, advice and guidance gave rise to the idea that students in their second and third year of the Bachelor of Nursing Programme could be formally paired with year one students to provide support, advice and guidance. Over the summer, the year three students had researched this and established the benefits and limitations of student-led mentorship programmes, and how they are run throughout tertiary institutions in New Zealand and internationally (Hendry, 2020). Their exploration of literature revealed that students who are peer mentored in their first year of tertiary study feel more integrated into the tertiary setting, have higher rates of retention, achieve higher academic grades and have lower failure rates. This has an increased likelihood of graduating, experience reduced stress and loneliness in addition to increasing a sense of self-efficacy and a psychological sense of belonging (Hendry et al., 2020). Following the formal discussion between the Head of School of Nursing and the year three nursing students, the Head of School offered guidance, support and encouragement for the implementation of a student-led mentorship programme recognising that this had the potential to offer an opportunity for nursing students to develop valuable intangible skills.
At the School of Nursing there is a recognition that nursing is in an ecliptic changing climate requiring a range of intangible skills often referred to as soft skills. Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) research into nursing skills attainment clearly states that the primary purpose of clinical education is to facilitate students’ progress towards the attainment of competence. This goal is impacted by a wide range of individual, interpersonal, contextual and organizational factors which can be conceptualized as a hierarchy. Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) states that this structuring makes it possible to see belongingness, a soft skill, a crucial precursor to students’ learning and success. Soft skills according to England et al., (2020) help people manage conflict and create inclusive relationships that improve team performances, ideas creation, negotiations of solutions and revamping of processes. More importantly according to England et al., (2020) soft skills affect how information is shared among colleagues and the way in which it is perceived and understood in the working environment. Yet, many students miss opportunities early in their careers because they do not have adequate practice integrating soft skills (Baldwin et al., 2011; Ng, 2020). Furthermore, in nursing curricula, tangible and technical skills dominate theory and clinical practice. However, the intangible skills of communication and leadership considered soft skills are less visible and measurable, (Liebrecht & Montenery, 2016; Ng, 2020). Therefore, the implementation of a student-led mentorship programme offered a possible opportunity for nursing students to develop these intangible skills.

The five, year three nursing students led the mentorship programme as the Mentorship Programme Leaders. The programme involved the Mentorship Programme Leaders matching Mentor volunteers from the year two and three Bachelor of Nursing programme to the year one Bachelor of Nursing students who wished to be mentored. These years one students completed a short questionnaire querying if they wanted to be paired with someone of similar age, gender, study background and culture. It was outlined by the Mentorship Programme Leaders that the Mentors’ role was to provide social supports, not to tutor, read assessments etc. as academic support services are already accessible at and through the institute. When the Mentorship Programme Leaders introduced the programme to the nursing students across the Bachelor of Nursing Programme it was met with enthusiasm (Hendry et al., 2020). Within the first month the Mentorship Programme Leaders were approached by students from other nursing programmes at the institute, the New Zealand Diploma in Enrolled Nursing and the New Zealand Certificate in Study and Career
Preparation (Health and Wellness), and with an endorsement from the Head of School, they became part of the student-led mentorship programme.

The two purposes of the student-led mentorship programme were; (1) to foster better communication and community between students to reduce stress and anxiety and to improve their sense of belonging; and (2) to provide an opportunity for Mentorship Programme Leaders and Mentors to improve their intangible skills of communication and leadership.

The first year of this inaugural student-led mentorship programme was completed in November 2019. A narrative enquiry focussed on the stories of the individuals who were partakers of this programme, offering an understanding of their experiences and its outcomes. The scope of this research was to bring reliability, credibility and transferability to this student-led mentorship programme. It was also was to enhance an understanding of the need for intangible skills, such as belonging and communication and their value alongside the core clinical skills required to gain competency in nursing education. The outcome of this study also enabled a decision regarding the continuation of the programme in future academic years.

**Research Design**

**Research methodology**

The qualitative research methodology selected was guided by a narrative enquiry research approach (Berry, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holligan & Wilson, 2015; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) to illustrate the stories of the students’ experiences of being part of the inaugural student-led mentorship programme. The narrative stories were captured by students writing their individual stories using the electronic learning platform *Blackboard*. A narrative enquiry relies on stories for data and lends itself particularly well to studies of changes in a society and societal groups (Berry, 2016). In this case the implementation of a student-led mentorship programme was a change within the School of Nursing, with the purpose to foster better communication and community between students to reduce stress and anxiety and to improve their sense of belonging while providing an opportunity for Mentorship Programme Leaders and Mentors to improve their intangible skills of communication and leadership.
**Ethical Clearance**

Ethical clearance was received in 2019 by the Southern Institute of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee. An ethical application was submitted to the committee to ensure the safety of the researchers and participants in the research and that all aspects of data collection met the requirements of informed consent and privacy. Consent was implied if a participant completed one or both questions of the questionnaire. The researchers received the data from Blackboard, with all participant names removed. The only identifying feature was information concerning which role they had in the programme.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected by two questions developed by the researchers and loaded onto the electronic learning platform, Blackboard. The data was collected in the final two weeks of the academic year. An announcement was placed on Blackboard with an information sheet explaining the study and the date the questions would no longer be available. If students did not have access to an electronic device, they could complete the questionnaire using the on-site computer suites.

The first question was a multiple-choice question that asked:

Were you a:

A. Mentorship Programme Leader,
B. Mentor
C. Mentee

The second, an essay question asked: “Please share your story of being either a Mentorship Programme Leader, Mentor or Mentee”. Guidance was provided for this question that stated: “Your story can be presented as single words, bullet points, sentences, paragraphs, pictures or a mixture of all of these”.

**Participants**

All students (n=188) who had been either a Mentorship Programme Leader (n=5), Mentor (n=78) or Mentee (n=105) were invited to participate in this study. A total of 82 percent (n=154)
responded. The participants who responded were made up of Mentorship Programme Leaders (n=4), Mentors (n=66) and Mentees (n=84).

All participants contributed to both questions. Regarding the second question, participants wrote varying amounts from three sentences to twelve paragraphs. The average response was four paragraphs (approximately 250 words).

Data Analysis
The individual stories were grouped into three subgroups according to whether the participant was; a Mentorship Programme Leader, a Mentor or a Mentee. The analysis followed Creswell and Poth (2018) guidance of reorganising stories into a general type of framework called re-storying (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72). This framework involved reading the stories and analysing them for general concepts. Each response was repeatedly read, both separately and simultaneously to become familiar with the data and general concepts. The analysis initially focused on structural components of the narratives; how they were written, the ways in which language was used to communicate the participants’ experiences and the significance of these. Secondly, a content level analysis extracted predominant experiences expressed within and between the participants stories. The narrative segments presented verbatim were selected according to their perceived relevance ensuring that a collection of stories was represented.

Results
Mentorship Programme Leader stories
The Mentorship Programme Leaders stories explained that they presented the student-led mentorship programme to students in all three cohorts of the Bachelor of Nursing programme during the first two weeks of the 2019 academic year. They expressed a sense of achievement from the numbers of students who volunteered to mentor, and the students from the year one cohort who wished to be mentored. Their stories explained that the programme rapidly expanded when the New Zealand Diploma in Enrolled Nursing and the New Zealand Certificate in Study and Career Preparation (Health and Wellness) cohorts asked if they could also be part of the programme. The Mentorship Programme Leaders expressed that this presented a new challenge, but one that was welcomed. One Mentorship Programme Leader stated, “We were not expecting these programmes
to want to be a part of this, but it was fantastic as it began to break down barriers between these, I felt we become a unified School of Nursing.” Another Mentorship Programme Leader stated, “Bringing all the programmes together was great, we shared and learnt from each other, perhaps in the future the postgraduate programme could also be part of this.” Collectively, the Mentorship Programme Leaders stories expressed that in the first month they were faced with many challenges that they had not foreseen during their planning, including the number of students who wanted to be Mentors and Mentees. An additional challenge expressed by the Mentorship Programme Leaders was managing their study alongside supporting the Mentors, and each other. They explained these challenges were excellent learning opportunities and during the latter part of the first month, the programme was running smoothly. One story stated, “The opportunities this programme provided for me included the opportunity to increase my problem-solving abilities, to make decisive decisions and further develop my individual leadership style, this has been so valuable.”

The Mentorship Programme Leaders stories collectively noted that there had been resistance to programmes such as this being set up in other tertiary institutes. One Mentorship Programme Leader questioned in her story why there would be such resistance to developing leadership opportunities and providing programmes to help further students’ academic performance and mental wellbeing when it was so easy to establish. This thought was further highlighted by another Mentorship Programme Leader who stated, “In reality nursing students are the future leaders of tomorrow and creating a safe environment to test their leadership skills now should be encouraged.”

The Mentorship Programme Leadership team have built a solid foundation that will be passed to the new leadership team. One story stated,

After passing the baton to the new leaders I am excited to see where they will take the programme. My hope for the future is to see more students stepping into leadership roles and finding other areas within tertiary or nursing environments that they can help improve.
Collectively the Mentorship Programme Leader stories expressed that although this was a student-led programme, it could not have been done without the support of the Head of School of Nursing. Each Mentorship Programme Leader story expressed that they had a safe supported environment to test/challenge their leadership ability, to push themselves further, and to figure out/understand what worked and what did not. Mutually the Mentorship Programme Leaders stories articulated that this was a valued learning opportunity.

**Mentor stories**

The stories from the Mentors expressed a sense of achievement, an opportunity to give back to fellow students, and to develop their communication, leadership, and time management skills. They expressed a sense of pride in the intangible skills developed that they felt would be essential as nursing preceptors in the future. The Mentors’ stories communally noted how different the campus felt. One Mentor’s story explained, “We were receiving feedback from students that the mentorship programme had broken down the barricades between cohorts, and even different nursing courses, with the EN [Enrolled Nursing] and SCP [Study in Career Preparation] students on board.” A further Mentor story continued this concept stating, “Students interacted with each other much more than previous years.” Another Mentor story expressed, “When I was in year one it felt very separate from the other years; I think we have broken the walls down.” A sense of collaboration between programmes and cohorts emerged; collectively, the Mentors’ stories expressed that connections with students throughout the School of Nursing were positively made.

A few Mentors’ (n=6) stories conveyed feelings of being needed in the beginning but not so much as the year progressed. One Mentor’s story stated: “It was great in the beginning. I felt like I was making a difference for her, but as she made friends she moved away and needed me less. In a way it was great, but I did feel a bit un-needed.” Another Mentor’s story said, “I did not know my Mentee had withdrawn from the programme, I kept texting and received no reply. I was unsure what I was meant to do about this.”

In summary, the Mentors’ stories supported the view that they perceived their communication skills had expanded and their leadership skills were enriched. A common thread in the Mentors’
stories included feelings that the programme was a great initiative, well supported and provided opportunities to meet new people and engage across the programmes and cohorts within these.

**Mentee stories**

For the Mentees, their stories expressed that they felt a sense of welcome and belonging. They conveyed that having a Mentor helped them to settle into a new tertiary environment, gain advice on how to manage their workload, build friendships and network with other nursing students. A common statement in the Mentees’ stories was that being mentored had worked well as a social support system for them. Their stories expressed that throughout the year, the mentor support had helped combat burnout, bullying and stress. Their collective concerns regarding bullying and stress were stated in multiple (n=72) Mentees’ stories as being of significant concern to them with publications across different media expressing bullying and stress as being common across nursing environments.

The shared activities were highlighted throughout the Mentees’ stories. They voiced that these enabled a sense of comradery as a relaxed shared experience. One Mentee stated, “I loved sharing lunch with everyone, and during these I learnt heaps, it was just awesome.” Another avowed: “Taking the time to share lunch with the whole school was tremendous, I met wonderful people and made firm friends across the School of Nursing. I actually believed I belonged with these people, actually my confidence increased.”

The future of the student-led mentorship programme was given emphasis in the Mentees’ stories with strong references to the continuation of this. A Mentee stated, “I am excited to volunteer to be a Mentor next year, I have so much to give, in a way I owe my Mentor for being amazing.” Another Mentee stated:

I arrived at the institution, terrified and was not sure if I would stay in the first week. My Mentor spent time with me, helped me understand what I was feeling. I remember him taking me to the café and just listening. I want to be that person as a Mentor next year, this programme must continue.
Discussion

The stories from this study support the view that the inaugural implementation of a student-led mentorship programme was successful for the participants. The results of this study are consistent with previous evaluations of mentorship programmes. Bulut et al. (2010) highlighted in their evaluation of a mentorship programme that mentoring was a learning and developmental process that had increased student satisfaction. A scoping review conducted by Jacobs (2017) concluded that nursing student peer mentorship is about support, connections, and a process of socialised learning. Yomtov et al., (2017) quasi-experimental study measured the effectiveness of a university peer-mentoring program at a comprehensive university in Southern California, which aimed to increase retention and graduation rates at the university. This research (Yomtov et al., 2017) measured the effectiveness of the program through students' feelings of belonging, connectedness, perceived academic and social support, and familiarity with campus resources and facilities, concluding that mentored students significantly felt more integrated into the campus and more connected. These conclusions (Bulut et al., 2010; Jacobs, 2017; Yomtov et al., 2017) can also be deduced from this study’s results despite the different research methodology used.

This study guided by a narrative enquiry research approach suggested that some Mentors had experienced feelings of not being needed when Mentees reduced/ceased contact. Another opinion expressed was not being aware that a Mentee had decided to withdraw from the programme. These points align with Ssemata et al., (2017) qualitative research, an interpretative method of naturalistic inquiry that found concerns about mentoring mostly occurred when participants’ experiences with the mentoring programmes were not well aligned with the desired characteristics of successful mentoring relationships. We have concluded from this research the need for an improvement for future programmes by implementing a system to advise Mentors and Mentees if their Mentee or Mentor has withdrawn from the programme and increasing support between the Mentorship Programme Leaders and Mentors when contact is reduced. The underlying consideration of a future implementation for these issues will be the privacy of the Mentor and Mentee.

The effectiveness of this inaugural student-led mentorship programme in fostering better communication and community between students, supports the continuation of this in the 2020 academic year. Furthermore, the success expressed by the Mentorship Programme Leaders and
Mentors regarding their development of intangible skills further validates the continuation of this programme alongside the positive stories of belonging from the Mentees.

Limitations
This study has three significant limitations. Firstly, it demonstrates the results of a student-led mentorship programme in only one school of nursing in New Zealand. The results cannot be generalised to all other nursing schools.

The second limitation is that no research data was collected until the end of the first year of the mentorship programme. Collecting data throughout the year could have captured some of the issues revealed in the stories in greater depth.

The third limitation is the capture of data through stories. The use of interviews and/or focus groups or case studies may have enabled increased complexity of investigation of the concepts identified in this study.

Conclusion
Despite the limitations identified, the researchers conclude that the inaugural student-led mentorship programme contributed to positive experiences for the Mentees with reduced anxiety and effective communication, while enabling a sense of belonging. Additionally, the researchers concluded that the Mentors and Mentorship Programme Leaders experienced improved intangible skills including communication, problem solving and leadership. These conclusions validate the continuation of this student-led mentorship programme with further opportunities for improvement, collaboration and future evaluation. Further research regarding retention rates and academic achievement would offer some quantitative data to sit alongside the evaluated narrated stories of the participants in this and future research studies.

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