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The ABC of peer mentoring – What secondary students have to say about cross-age peer mentoring in a regional Australian school.

ABSTRACT

Cross-age peer mentoring is an educational model that builds on peer support and mentoring to assist young people to enhance social relationships, develop cognitive skills and promote positive identity development. In this paper, we outline the evaluation process of a cross-age peer-mentoring program implemented in an Australian secondary school. This program had a distinctive focus on blending cross-age peer mentoring, academic tutoring and social support roles. We focus on the program's consumers—the voices of year 7 students (mentees) and year 10 students (mentors). Student perspectives were gathered using qualitative methods through repeated focus groups. Data was thematically analysed and the findings show observed changes in social relationships, problem solving skills, and engagement with literacy for both groups. We discuss the importance of this relationship for effective learning and examine the reported changes to engagement with relationship building. Implications for developing whole-of-school support and increasing wider participation are discussed.

Keywords: cross-age peer mentoring; literacy skills; social development; evaluation; secondary school

INTRODUCTION

Cross-age peer mentoring is a community-based model that aims to capture the power of peer relationships between young people as a platform for assisting young people to enhance their social relationships, develop learning skills and promote positive identity development. A wider aim in school-based settings is to improve retention and meaningful participation in school communities. The peer mentoring dyad is defined as an:

... interpersonal relationship between two youth of different ages that reflects a greater degree of hierarchical power imbalance that is typical of a friendship and in which the goal is for the older youth to promote one or more aspects of the younger youth's development (Karcher 2005, p. 266).

Cross-age peer mentoring emphasises a relationship akin to friendship in which there is a minimum of two years age-difference between the two young people and a focus that extends beyond academic or interpersonal difficulties (Karcher 2005). The formality of mentor and mentee roles however, separates this pairing from everyday friendships as an ‘artificial’ relationship that is goal-oriented and outcome-focussed.

This paper details the evaluation process of a cross-age peer mentoring program developed and implemented in a regional Australian secondary school. Our purpose is to outline the social benefits identified by students that stemmed from this program and to discuss the value of this model for enhancing student social wellbeing in addition to developing literacy skills. This program had a unique focus on blending peer mentoring, academic tutoring and social support roles, which fits with the Cross-Age Mentoring Program (CAMP) definition framed by Karcher (2005; 2007) and developed in the United States. In this paper, we attend to the perspectives of the participating students as consumers of the program. We focus on the students as ‘experts by experience’—the voices of the year 7 students (mentees) and year 10 students (mentors). Young people’s perspectives provide a rich and descriptive basis for understanding the successes and weaknesses of the program from an insider perspective.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, we consider international literature about cross-age peer mentoring and outline the local program evaluated. The second section outlines the evaluation strategy and methods, which relied on a primarily qualitative approach. Then, we outline the key findings emergent from the evaluation focussing on the voices of students (mentees) and mentors. Finally, we discuss how these outcomes support and diverge from the peer mentoring literature.

In particular, we discuss the significance of relationship as central to the success of cross-age peer mentoring and learning.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Approaches to cross-age peer mentoring

Interest in mentoring over the last decade nationally and internationally, is driven by the belief that mentoring is a promising intervention for young people (Karcher et al. 2006). As discussed by Baker and McGuire (2005), research supports and identifies the positive contributions mentoring can make. Research from the University of Western Sydney (2005) suggests that positive changes include new friendships, empathy for others' feelings, acceptance of others and a safe place for students to explore and address concerns or difficult issues such as bullying. Rhodes (2002) and Rhodes et al. (2006) propose that mentoring affects youth development in three interrelated ways: — first, by enhancing the youth's social relationships and emotional wellbeing; second, by improving cognitive skills through conversation and instruction; and third, through good role modelling and advocacy which can promote positive identity development. Rhodes et al. (2006) call for more in-depth qualitative approaches to understanding how these processes promote the social wellbeing of young people. This model has implications for retention of adolescents who may disconnect not only from learning but from social connections in the school environment.

The relationship between the peer mentor and the student mentee can create meaning and value of learning and literacy if located within the school environment. Axford et al. (2009) discuss becoming members of a learning community, and, becoming active, rather than passive, agents in school experiences. Rhodes et al. (2006) discuss the ways in which mentors can challenge and stimulate young people

with creative thinking and problem solving processes and generate ‘teachable moments’ in the mentoring relationship. Damon and Phelps (as cited in Kalkowski 1995, p. 197) suggest that peer ‘tutoring’ works because the ‘expert’ is not too distant in terms of authority and knowledge and these differences affect the discourse between them which results in a more active role of the student. The student does not feel constrained from expressing opinions, asking questions and risking untested solutions. It may be that scaffolding of relationships as well as learning could be occurring in ways suggested by Karcher and Herrera (2007, p. 4) in relation to adult mentors:

...peer interactions could provide the mentor with valuable insights into the child’s social skills and relationships as well as opportunities to scaffold the child’s peer-related development.

For the mentees, the peer mentoring model can generate skills in social acceptance and assertiveness, as found by Jucovy and Herrera (2009). A positive relationship with the mentor potentially paves the way for a more assertive relationship with teachers and therefore greater confidence and responsibility for learning.

The benefits of a school-based program for cross-age peer mentoring are many and, with low cost implementation, has been the reason for the resurgence in these models (Hansen 2003). Cross-age mentoring differs from other mentoring models as both mentor and mentee are participants within the same learning environment with close proximity in age. School-based cross-age programs encounter difficulties experienced by mentoring programs nationally and internationally, such as the availability of mentors and the supervision and retention of mentors (Karcher & Lindwall as cited in Karcher et al. 2006, p. 712). From early research into CAMPs in United States, Karcher suggested that benefits could be outweighed by risks particularly where a lack of structure and supervision of matches was concerned. In

later research Karcher (2008, p. 141) stated that “the mentor training, program curriculum and the use of high school students as intervention agents likely all contribute to the effectiveness of the cross-age mentoring program” and lamented the lack of training resources available within most initial and ongoing training. Karcher’s (2009) research details a structured program with eight hours of training and a two-year curriculum. Results support the academic, social and emotional benefits of a well-structured cross-age peer-mentoring program. Other discussions in recent mentoring literature have a focus on balancing ‘developmental’ (unstructured, non-directive, focus on relationship building) versus ‘prescriptive’ (structured, outcome-focused and involving learning activities that are driven by an agenda of change) approaches to mentoring (LaRose et al. 2010, p. 127-128). LaRose et al. (2010) argue that both approaches are compatible and can mutually ‘...promote a quality mentoring bond and the development of mentees’ (p. 137). This paper outlines qualitative findings from an evaluation of a school-based cross-age peer-mentoring program that implemented a blended model combining developmental and prescriptive approaches.

Overview of the local mentoring program

The Peer Mentoring Literacy Program was implemented at a Year 7 to 10 secondary school in an Australian regional city (population approx. 65 000) in 2008. The program was funded by a taskforce of stakeholders interested in youth welfare and developed in partnership with a local high school. Mentoring was identified by the taskforce as the preferred strategy for addressing employer-identified issues of transition to the workplace, specifically poor literacy and numeracy skills. A cross-age peer mentoring literacy model was developed based on target group need, research and best practice mentoring. While the program initially focused on

improving literacy skills, the development of social relationships and instilling confidence were also paramount to students' subsequent learning. This model is a blend of peer mentoring, tutoring and support but primarily fits the CAMPs definition framed by Karcher (2007) by giving priority to the relationship, a full year commitment, structured sessions and at least a two-year age gap between mentor and mentee.

The program was intended to have both social and academic implications for both mentors and mentees. The program focused on the development of strong mentor/mentee relationships that allowed flexible and creative teaching methods. The aims of the program were to: 1) To increase the overall literacy skills of both peer mentors and their students; 2) To develop strategies that assist in developing literacy skills; 3) To develop confidence in approaching literacy tasks and Information Technology; and, 4) To recognize peer mentors for their roles and contributions. Training and program activity were coordinated between an English teacher within the school and an external Consultant on mentoring.

Potential mentees were identified on the basis of low literacy skills at the beginning of the school year (February to March) and were matched with recruited mentors at the commencement of the program. Mentees were selected to participate because first, they were identified by English staff as having low literacy skills in comparison to their peers, and second, they were not currently receiving additional literacy support and were therefore potentially 'falling through the gaps'. Mentors were selected through a process of recruitment in which senior Year 10 students were invited to apply for this role as one of several leadership positions across the school. Mentors went through a two-stage selection process; they were assessed by teaching staff on the quality of their written application and their performance in an interview.

Selected mentors received initial training which consisted of seven one-hour modules. Training covered a number of topics including understanding the mentoring role, rights and responsibilities, communication and teaching skills, and managing difficult behaviours. During training, the concept of 'personal power' was introduced to highlight the significance of power to meaningful relationships and to emphasise the principle of empowerment as the cornerstones of mentoring. The training program was also used as a process for assessing mentors' suitability, their capacity to engage and interact with others and as an indication of their ongoing commitment to the role.

Across the eight-month duration of the program, eighteen (18) mentors and mentees were matched. There were very few transitions in the group composition and only three student mentees withdrew. Attendance was generally high across the course of the program with some minor fluctuation due to competing timetables and wider school activities. Mentors and mentees met formally for a minimum of one hour each week for the duration of the school year, either in their classroom with a class teacher present or in another pre-arranged area such as the library without the teacher. Mentors also met weekly with the English teacher and consultant to discuss lesson plans and any issues that arose. Within their pairs, mentors assisted mentees with a range of learning tasks that primarily focussed on enhancing literary comprehension¹. Learning tasks included testing mentees' spelling, word-recognition games and supporting students with their reading.

The mentor role extended beyond the classroom. Mentors had a wider capacity in the school by assisting with student leadership events such as an official launch of the program. Mentoring activity primarily took place within the school however, towards the end of the school year, the program started to expand horizontally to other schools as the mentors assumed a trainer role in working with potential mentors from

a neighbouring secondary school. This was in response to noted interest from secondary schools in surrounding suburbs and the work of the Consultant in promoting the model at a regional level. Consequentially, this helped prepare mentors to train the following year-group's 'mentors' in their own school as part of the program's sustainability strategy.

APPROACH AND METHODS OF EVALUATION

An external research team was contracted through the local university social work department to evaluate the capacity of the mentoring program to generate positive changes in literacy development, learning and social relationships. The evaluation strategy implemented by the research team relied on primarily qualitative data generated from interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders. There were three data gathering times during the program—1) at the completion of the training for peer mentors, 2) four months after commencement, and 3) at completion at the end of the school year. We had also hoped to use School based measures of student literacy skills but found that this data had been inconsistently collected by School staff and was therefore unusable for the purposes of this evaluation

In developing the evaluation strategy, we wanted to emphasise a formative, naturalistic approach (Owen & Rogers 1999). This approach was most appropriate given the broad aims of the program. We anticipated that the effectiveness of the program would rely on the development of 'learning relationships' among mentees, mentors, and teachers. These relationships defied, at this stage of our understanding, reduction to quantitative measures. The numbers of participating year 7 students and peer mentors were small which meant making tests for significance impossible and the random allocation of students to a control or comparison group was not appropriate.

As the research team was external to the School, we relied on a close working relationship with the Consultant to manage the operational aspects of the evaluation. This external status presumably offered a degree of objectivity to the evaluation. It meant, however, that we did not have direct access to student records, any identifying data about students, or control over the process of organizing the various interviews and focus groups. Sources of data for the evaluation were:

- (1) Brief questionnaire of peer mentors following completion of training.
- (2) Repeated focus groups with peer mentors, parents and guardians of participating students.
- (3) Semi-structured telephone interviews with parents and guardians of participating students.
- (4) Semi-structured interviews with other key informants —teachers and members of senior management.

Table 1 provides detail on the number of stakeholders participating and method of participation in the evaluation. Focus groups were facilitated with both mentor and mentee groups in August (second term, mid-school year) and November 2008 (third term, towards the end of school year). From the mentee group, five (5) students participated in the first group discussion and ten (10) participated in the end-of-year discussion. From the mentor group, nine (9) students participated across both August and November group discussions. In addition, 19 mentors completed a written evaluation form about the training received. The lower number of mentors participating in focus groups was a result of their limited availability and difficulties with locating suitable times that would suit the maximum number of participants across a crowded timetable.

Focus groups ran for forty to sixty minutes, which was the maximum time to sustain student's interest and attention. Focus groups with both mentors and mentees followed a similar protocol to allow comparisons in responses, using a list of pre-prepared open-ended questions that were asked in a flexible manner. Questions covered a range of topics including involvement in the program launch, understanding of mentor role, observed outcomes and how we could make this program better (areas for improvement). For example, mentors were asked *Why did you become a mentor? What kinds of activities did you do with your mentee? What did you learn from the experience? How could we have done it better?*

All qualitative data was digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. Key findings were developed through inductive thematic analysis. This involved two members of the evaluation team reading the transcriptions line by line using an open coding approach, noting emergent and recurring perceptions and observations that were repeated and shared across the sub-sets of mentor and mentee' transcripts (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Thematic codes were developed by clustering similar open codes into thicker clusters that told a collective story about the peer mentoring process. The researchers compared and discussed emerging themes throughout the analysis process to ensure a degree of consistency and trustworthiness to the findings.

Table 1

Number of stakeholders and method of participation in the program evaluation

Stakeholder groups	Number participating	Method of participation
Year 10 students (mentors)	19*	Brief training questionnaire (N=19) Focus groups x 2 (9 participants out of 19 mentors)
Year 7 students (mentees)	15	Focus groups x 2 (1 st group N=5, 2 nd group N=10)
Parents and guardians	19	Focus groups x 1 Semi-structured telephone interviews
Teachers and senior school management	4	Semi-structured interviews

* Nineteen (19) students completed the training questionnaire and nine of these students subsequently participated in focus groups, which represents almost half the total group of mentors (43%).

Ethical approval was obtained through the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee and the Tasmanian Department of Education. Written parental consent for child participation in the evaluation was sought through standard school procedures. Participation in the evaluation process was voluntary for students; consequently, some students chose not to participate. The Consultant and teachers encouraged students to attend discussions however we were frequently competing with other timetabled activities that drew students away from the program. As an ethical strategy, we did not want to appear to be coercive in any way as a strict separation was maintained between being a part of the program and part of the evaluation. This is a limitation of the present study, as we have not heard from all students involved in the program and are limited to the perspectives of self-elected participants.

In the following section, we focus on the voices of student consumers of the program and report findings based on focus group discussions with 1) Year 7 students as mentees and 2) Year 10 students as mentors.

FINDINGS

1) Mentees' perceptions of cross-age mentoring

i. Engaging and relationship-building across time

The length of the program was a significant dimension in allowing sufficient time for mentees to build meaningful relationships with their mentors. The mentees spoke more positively about the experience in the second round of focus groups than the first, suggesting the need for the program to be sustained over time to see notable changes. Clarity in expectations and goals was not apparent at the outset however, most mentees recognised they were selected because they were 'poor readers'. For some this was initially a stigmatising rather than a positive experience: '*People have*

been calling me a retard and I don't know what to do about that.' However, by the end of the program, mentees no longer experienced a sense of being stigmatised and most believed that their peers were jealous of their newfound status as buddies of older peers.

By the completion of the program, it was clear that the bonds between mentors and mentees had become more tangible. In the first focus group (August), they spoke about their mentors as 'nice' and 'helpful' but some did not know their mentor's name and there were no indications of a close bond. By the second group (November), it was clear that these relationships had developed. The students spoke about their mentors as being 'fun', 'nice', and 'kind' and 'understanding them more than the teachers'. One student expressed his disappointment when his mentor could not come to his class due to other commitments— his disappointment suggests a close attachment had formed between them:

Yeah, sometimes like my peer mentor, if he's got something he wants to do he doesn't come to peer support. Because if you are like really relying on it and wanting them to come because you need help and they don't come.

The persistence of the mentors in following up spelling activities which mentees found challenging was also viewed favourably by mentees for sustaining the mentor relationship and staying motivated:

... Gave them a word and if I didn't know they [mentors] were like, they'll spell it out until you get it right. Or they like say, oh go to the next word and then we work on it through the weeks and stuff until you get it right.

ii. Perceived changes and achievements

The feedback provided by participating mentees' highlighted perceived improvements in their literacy skills and their attitudes to learning. Mentees commented on their changed perceptions and attitudes towards reading. For example, one student stated: *'I used to like, just like when we went to the library to read I didn't choose any books*

but now I choose the little novels like when I go to peer support'. Application to everyday activities was crucial in assisting mentees to appreciate the value of reading in the 'real world'. Mentees discussed their extended appreciation of the importance of literacy skills for information gathering, obtaining a boat license or passport, and getting a 'better' job: 'And you'll get a better job if you do peer support because if you can't read, then you'll be able to read when you finish because they help.'

As a fundamental factor to the program, all the participating mentees felt that their skill level in literacy had improved. One student in recounting his improvement in spelling tests conveyed a strong sense of achievement:

I did like a couple of spelling tests like a couple of weeks ago and at first I got like 6 out of 10 and then I got 8 and then I got 10. The first one... like I got 2 right and then the next one I got 5 and then I got 10. So I got 10 right the last 2 times.

These changes were reinforced by the affirmative comments of mentors when reflecting on their mentee's progress and achievements.

2) Mentors' perceptions of cross-age mentoring

i. Relating to younger students and building relationships

The relationship between mentors and mentees was essential for enabling both parties to work together harmoniously and productively. Open communication and the importance of trust were two factors identified by mentors as crucial to relationship-building. Demonstrating empathy towards mentees' thoughts, feelings and different learning approaches was also fundamental. Mentors recognised the importance of being responsive to mentees' personal as well as learning interests. They connected with their mentees within the schoolyard and described how mentees would approach them to discuss interpersonal problems:

Say you're running an errand through the school and they [year 7s] may be going past you as well and say hey, and even in the school grounds when it's like recess and lunch they come up and talk to you and stuff.

Some mentors believed that mentees felt safer in talking to another student as a non-authoritative figure as opposed to approaching teachers about interpersonal problems or learning issues. The power of this relationship was evident in situations of conflict when teachers called upon mentors to work with year 7 students experiencing behavioural or learning difficulties: ... *The teacher needed me. I think that he [student] finds it a lot easier to go off, talk to somebody, and have a conversation.* Mentors also provided guidance to their mentees in responding to situations of conflict with teachers and other peers.

While the mentor-student relationship was not always a perfect match, mentors generally spoke about their participation in an affirming manner. However, being a mentor was not without its challenges. The first point of frustration was a logistical difficulty in matching lesson times across conflicting timetables. The second challenge arose from confusion between class-teachers and mentors about the operations of the program. Mentors felt that sometimes teachers did not understand how the program worked and as a result mentees were occasionally prevented from leaving the classroom with their mentor. On a positive note, mentors had developed their own solution by taking their lesson plan to the class-teacher so that teachers were informed of how they were going to spend their time with mentees.

ii. Learning techniques in the mentoring relationship

Central to the learning relationship was the student-centred approach described by mentors in their interactions with mentees. Mentors described adaptive techniques, which suggested a student-centred approach to learning by giving their mentees a choice in the kinds of activities they undertook; by negotiating the amount of time

spent on each activity; by using a mix of activities to sustain attention; and, by using a reward system to encourage mentees to stay on track. Two mentors decided to break away from the conventional model of working one-to-one with mentees and paired their mentees together for specific tasks. The mentors recognised that their mentees worked more productively in small groups and responded by adapting the established learning format:

... we get them to interact with each other and encourage them to talk to each other... You know that they're friends outside and these things will be programmed in class and that kind of thing.

According to the two mentors, this group format was received favourably by the mentees and led to more active involvement in shared activities. In addition, the mentees commented that working in groups took the focus away from them as individuals and they did not feel as embarrassed when they got something wrong. It appears that small group working helped to normalise the shared experience of finding reading and spelling challenging.

iii. Perceived changes for year 7 students and mentors

Mentors observed a number of changes in their mentees' social and literacy skills. In regards to social relationships, mentors felt their mentees appeared more confident in relating to older peers and in being at secondary school. This was evident in the way mentees were observed engaging in a positive manner with other students and teachers, their more focused approach in the classroom and the increased level of interaction with their mentor. Mentors commented on how there appeared to be less friction within some student-teacher relationships.

In reflecting on academic performance, mentors believed their mentees had greater confidence with their reading, with some mentees showing improvements in their spelling test results and feeling more positive about reading aloud:

He [year 7 student] was a bit shy about reading and now he's a lot more confident and it doesn't matter if I say, "can you just read the first chapter in this book?". He doesn't complain much any more, he just does it.

The mentors commented on how their mentees appeared less distracted and more attentive while other mentees were described as 'less trouble' and more industrious during class time.

For the mentors, participation brought a number of perceived positive changes on an interpersonal level. Mentors stated how they felt more confident about themselves, about meeting and interacting with younger students, about helping others and about taking on a leadership role. Mentors identified the importance of positive role modelling for the benefit of younger students and the need to 'lead by example':

I think with leadership especially, you have to be very aware of your actions and what kind of impact and how they're perceived by the younger students. So not even just when you are working with them [year 7 students] but just like everything that you do around the school.

Mentors spoke about the problem solving skills they had successfully applied in helping their mentees resolve interpersonal difficulties with peers and teachers. Some of these problem-solving skills were transferable and had been applied when resolving disagreements with their own peers.

DISCUSSION

This paper has sought to identify the social and academic benefits stemming from a cross-age peer mentoring program located in a secondary school setting. The qualitative strategy chosen to evaluate the project has generated useful insights into the operations of a complex and creative innovation in an Australian regional school. Findings from focus groups with mentors and mentees indicate benefits that extend beyond the development of literacy skills and highlight the potential for peer

mentoring to enhance social, interpersonal and problem solving skills amongst secondary students. Notable benefits for mentees included the reported improvement in literacy skills, affirming learning experiences through engagement with supportive and trustworthy peers, and a greater sense of agency. For the mentors benefits included the development of communication, problem solving and leadership skills, together with a strong sense of satisfaction about contributing positively to the program.

Central to the success of the program was the power of building transformative relationships. The key to these effective learning relationships was the commitment, trust and responsiveness of both mentors and mentees. LaRose et al. (2010) confirm that although for young adults a directive approach is advantageous the reciprocity of the relationship and responsiveness to mentee needs remains paramount. In general, the findings confirm the benefits of the cross-age mentoring approach as defined by Karcher (2007). Findings from our evaluation show the positive benefits for both mentees and mentors engaged in literacy-based activities who were close in age. The relationship is clearly central to the effectiveness of cross-age peer mentoring (Karcher 2007). More specifically, the findings resonate with key aspects of Rhodes et al.'s (2006) model of youth development across dimensions of social and emotional, cognitive and identity development. However, this program deviates from Rhodes et al.'s model as the central focus is on cross-age peer mentoring between adolescents, as opposed to an adolescent and an adult mentor. This highlights the applicability of this model for evaluating the outcomes of cross-age mentoring.

With regards to social and emotional development, the findings emphasise the centrality of a trustworthy, committed and reliable companion as essential for

supporting mentees' engagement in new or challenging learning activities. Mentors' comments also indicate the acquisition of new social skills amongst the mentee group that assisted mentees in responding to interpersonal conflicts with teachers/ adults and other peers. On a cognitive level, the flexible and responsive approach of mentors generated numerous opportunities for inclusive learning and for promoting small successes, as discussed by Rhodes et al. (2006). These opportunities would have been lost if mentors were not prepared to adapt their tutoring approaches to the specific needs of mentees or advocate for time together outside of scheduled classes. It also appears that the mentor relationship helped younger students to focus on their academic work and remain attentive in classroom situations.

In relation to identity development, mentors played an essential role in engaging their mentees in social activities that mirrored core values of reciprocity, trust and respect. Through their leadership roles, the mentors assisted mentees in combating the stigmatising status of being identified as a 'poor reader'. Participation and the building of mentor relationships over time helped alleviate this stigmatising status and, as argued by Rhodes et al. (2006), helped shift mentees away from this potentially totalising identity label.

The findings suggest that the program made a greater contribution to the identity status of mentors within the school more so than to that of their younger mentees. Elements of this resonate with Karcher's (2009) conclusions that participating as a mentor can yield positive effects for both young people as mentors and adolescents as mentees. However, getting this balance right in providing equal positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees requires careful planning and reflection. In our program, mentors clearly had a far more active role in the school community, for example through assisting in delivering training to other schools. For

mentors, a strong sense of achievement resulted through seeing the notable changes and successes of their mentees and they enjoyed the high status that accompanied undertaking the role of a mentor. This indicates a need for more creative methods of engaging both mentors and mentees in partnership in school community-based activities that award equal recognition to both their contributions.

The findings generated from this evaluation indicate a number of areas for further research. As external evaluators, we were unable to confirm the positive changes reported by participating students through measurable data. While this limitation does not detract from the insights gleaned from qualitative findings, the use of validated measures pre- and post evaluation program would help capture improvements in confidence, self-esteem, interpersonal relations and advances in literacy. Other variables such as gender and ethnicity could be included to ascertain any social differences in student outcomes. Our findings suggest that teachers can inadvertently block learning activities between mentee and mentors if they do not comprehend or appreciate the operations of the program. Accordingly, another stream of research could focus on teachers' ratings and perceptions of peer mentoring, as staff engagement is critical to the success of this kind of program.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the evaluation demonstrated the value and potential offered by the cross-age peer-mentoring program in contributing to the academic learning and social, cognitive and identity development of both mentees and mentors. The evaluation confirms the centrality of developing meaningful and responsive relationships among student groups in secondary schools and supports the blended model approach. More rigorous methods of measuring academic outcomes would be advantageous to support

qualitative findings, however, they may not be evident over a one-year period and a longitudinal approach may be required. This limitation does not overshadow the qualitative successes of the program in providing a flexible, affirming and nurturing model for improving peer relationships and student engagement with literacy. This discussion highlights the potential of cross-age peer mentoring in secondary schools to promote socially responsible relationships amongst students and to enhance social inclusion in school environments.

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ⁱ Numeracy was a secondary area of activity for peer mentoring that was matched to individual student learning needs. This paper focuses primarily on literacy as the central skill-set for student development.