Inspired Learning: Creating engaged teaching and learning environments for university and school students through university to school mentor programs

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The Inspire Peer Mentor Program (Inspire) operates of Flinders University in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, and has received funding from the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). The experience gained during the past three years has indicated that a mentoring program between the University and schools located in its local region, which includes key areas of low socio-economic status, can be a major form of community engagement for Higher Education. Inspire received a commendation in the recent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Report (2006) as a strategy for community engagement. This article is written in two sections. The first will use the experience gained from Inspire to discuss the Higher Education sector's involvement in school-based mentoring programs as a strategy for community engagement. Catherine Koerner's analysis of the literature on mentoring, finds that mentoring programs can be an effective intervention with communities to increase school retention rates and engagement with formal learning if they are adequately resourced. She argues that the implication of this finding for the tertiary sector is that mentoring programs can be a strategic form of community engagement. In the second section, John Harris provides a case study of the adoption of the school-based mentoring model by the Teaching Experience Office of the School of Education at Flinders University as one example of how mentoring is being embedded within faculty programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those pre-service teachers who had participated, as Inspire mentors were better prepared for their teaching practicums. As a result, second year education students are placed on 20 days of school experience over two semesters to better prepare them for their teaching practicums in their third and fourth years of their Education Degree.

University to school mentoring, engaged teaching and learning environments, Higher Education community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The Inspire Peer Mentor Program (Inspire) operates at Flinders University in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, and has received funding from the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) Mentor Marketplace Program. The first funding was to pilot the program from 2004 until July 2005 and the second round has extended the funding until July 2009. The experience gained during Inspire's relatively short existence is indicating that a mentoring program between the University and schools located in the local region south of the University, which includes key areas of low socio-economic status, can be a major form of community engagement activity for Higher Education. Flinders University has committed, in the

funding application, to continue to fund the program at the end of the current funding round from FaCSIA. Inspire is implemented out of the Career & Employer Liaison Centre as a strategy for community engagement and received a commendation in the recent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) report, 2006 as a community engagement strategy for Flinders University. Flinders students from across all disciplines volunteer as mentors and receive training, monitoring and support throughout their involvement. Some mentors can gain 6 units credit for a minimum of 120 contact hours and written assessment.

This paper is written in two sections. The first will use the experience gained from Inspire to discuss the Higher Education sector's involvement in school-based mentoring programs as a strategy for community engagement that creates an engaged teaching and learning environment for both tertiary students (as mentors) and school students (as mentee's) across all discipline areas. Inspire is in the process of embedding mentoring within several degrees (such as education, science and mathematics, legal studies, languages and social work) as both a community engagement and service learning strategy. The second section is a case study that focuses on the adoption of the school-based mentoring model by the Teaching Experience Office of the School of Education, at Flinders University. Anecdotal evidence from pre-service teachers, supervising teachers and practicum assessors suggested that those pre-service teachers who had participated as Inspire mentors were better prepared for their teaching practicum's. As a result, the Teaching Experience Office implemented a school experience placement for second year education students who are placed for 20 days in schools over two semesters in their second year to better prepare them for their teaching practicum's in their third and fourth years of their Education Degree.

INSPIRE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

(A note on terms: In this section, 'children', 'young people' and 'students' refer to mentee's participating in the program. 'Mentors' are all Flinders University students).

Before a discussion on mentor programs as a strategy for community engagement by the tertiary sector, mentor programs themselves need to be considered. The last 25 years has produced an impressive amount of academic literature on mentoring, though there is reportedly a lack of consensus on defining mentoring (Colley 2003). Certainly, in contrast with role modelling, tutoring, coaching and buddy systems, mentoring is concerned with a 'whole of person' development that is actively supported by the mentor: "…mentoring focuses on explicit action by the mentor to assist the young person to reach their goal" (MacCullum & Beltman 2002, p.8). Further, Mentoring Australia (2000) define effective mentoring as:

 (a) a relationship that focuses on the needs of the mentee;

 (b) fosters caring and supportive relationships;

 (c) encourages all mentees to develop to their fullest potential; and

 (d) is a strategy to develop active community partnerships.

While the first three points above are important for the implementation of mentoring programs, the final point is of interest in terms of developing university-community partnerships as a community engagement strategy. Inspire community partners have consistently reported that Flinders University is viewed as a 'community participant' by the southern community due to the implementation of the mentoring programs in schools and alternative education programs (Inspire Feedback 2004, 2005 & 2006).

What does the research say about the benefits of mentoring, and what kinds of mentoring programs are worth the time and effort that they take to set up and implement well? There is a large body of research emerging out of the United States, where formal mentor programs, such as Big Brother/Big Sister, have been operating for 100 years. The research arose from a concern that mentor programs were becoming more prevalent without the accompanying rigour of empirical research to determine if the participants really do benefit, what those benefits actually are and

also to develop bench marks and models of good practice for existing and new mentor programs. With an increase of interest in youth studies during the 1970's and 1980's, research documented the growing number of young people without sufficient adult support to meet adolescent developmental needs (e.g. Coleman, 1974; Timpane, Abramowitz, Bobrow & Pascal, 1976; Lipsitz, 1977; Hamburg, 1987; Steinberg, 1986). Youth programs targeted specific issues (such as homelessness, drug use and teenage pregnancy) and focused on developing specific skills (academic skills for school, job search skills etc), but did (and still do not) allow for the development of a substantial relationship with a supportive adult to support their development through adolescence (Sipe, date unknown, p.1).

If the mentors are students in a tertiary institution, they also become a resource to the school, teacher and young person, in addition to providing a link to the university that is personalised. Thus the university students become a resource for building individual and community capacity. Knowledge and skill transfer occurs through the mentors' relationship with teachers, youth workers and young people and as a strategic intervention to increase school retention rates in low socio-economic areas. If we consider that "…young people who leave school prior to completing year 12 are twice as likely to become unemployed by age 24 than if they had completed year 12" (Bean, 2002 p.2), then it is essential that university's become active participants in programs to improve retention rates in schools as a key strategy to build both individual and community capacity.

Sipe (date unknown) provides a synthesis of 8 years of research undertaken on mentoring programs in the United States and the following section is taken from this synthesis. By looking at ten studies (Freedman, 1988, 1991; Styles & Morrow, 1992; Greim, 1992; Tierney & Branch, 1992; Furano, Roaf, Styles & Brancy, 1993; Mecartney, Styles & Morrow, 1994; Roaf, Tierney & Hunte, 1994; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995) over the eight-year period, Sipe is able to report the major findings organised around five questions that guided the research. I will respond to the five research questions identified by Sipe with a discussion and analysis of other literature on mentoring, and feedback and evaluation of Inspire over 2004, 2005 and 2006.

Can participating in mentoring programs make important and observable changes in the attitudes and behaviours of at-risk youth?

An impact study on young people matched with Big Brother/Big Sister mentors and a control group of young people waiting to be matched by Tierney, Grossman & Resch, (1995) provides clear evidence that young people can benefit from being involved in a well-run mentoring program. The findings include that the matched young people (called Little Brothers/Little Sisters) were 46 percent less likely than controls (who were young people on the waiting list to be matched with a mentor) to initiate drug use and 27 percent less likely to initiate alcohol use. They were nearly one-third less likely to hit someone and had 50 percent less days of school absenteeism as the control group. These findings have been reflected in anecdotal feedback from Inspire partner-organisation staff and mentors. If there is an increase in school attendance, this could indicate a re-engagement with formal learning that statistically leads to better employment outcomes and, as mentioned on pages 2-3, breaking the poverty cycle that dis-engaging from formal education contributes to. More detailed data collection to measure outcomes for young people involved in programs funded through Mentor Marketplace will be implemented through FaCSIA from February 2007.

Are there specific practices that characterize effective mentoring relationships?

Sipe (date unknown, p.15) found that effective mentors are more likely to engage in the following practices:

(a) They involved young people in deciding how the pair will spend their time together.

(b) They made a commitment to being consistent and dependable – to maintain a steady presence in the young person's life.

(c) They recognized that the relationship may be fairly one-sided for some time, and may involve silence and unresponsiveness from the young person. The adult takes responsibility for keeping the relationship alive.

(d) They paid attention to young people's need for 'fun. Not only is having fun a key part of relationship-building, but it provides young people with valuable opportunities that are often not otherwise available to them.

(e) They respected young people's view point.

(f) They sought, and utilized, the help and advice of program staff.

The findings across the ten studies indicate that at least 6 months of regular meetings are required to before young people report that they have a trusting relationship with their mentor. These findings support those reported by Hartley (2004, p.15) in Australia, that short-term mentoring relationships, or broken/disbanded mentoring relationships have the potential harm children reinforcing vulnerabilities of young people feeling abandoned. Consequently the importance of appropriate support for mentors in their role is paramount to the success of mentoring relationships. This will be the subject of a research project to commence in 2007 where Inspire mentors are invited to participate in a qualitative research project to identify key factors that increase the retention of volunteer mentors and therefore increase the outcomes for the young people participating in the program and have implications for universities that implement mentoring programs as a strategy for community engagement.

What program structures and supports are needed to maximize "best practices among mentors?

Across the ten studies the strongest conclusion drawn is the importance of providing mentors with support in their efforts to build trust and to develop a positive relationship with the young people. The structures that need to be in place include orientation and training for mentors, ongoing supervision and support. Sipe (date unknown) found that matching is the least critical element and that requirements to be matched in common interests, demographic backgrounds etc were over-ridden by the mentor's approach as mentioned in point two above. Jekielek, Moore and Hair (2002) have also found that the quality of mentoring relationships correlates with good program structure and planning. Interestingly their findings highlight the importance of the mentor and mentee's interests in the matching process, social and academic activities and undertaking social activities that assist to build trust by taking a 'youth development' or youth-centred approach to the relationship. While this seems to contrast with the findings in Sipe's synthesis of ten research projects as referred to above, it may be that the mentors in Jekielek, Moore and Hair (2002) also exhibited the effective characteristics identified by Sipe. In an early consideration of school-based mentor projects in the U.S., Herrera found that "agency support for school-based mentors is essential in creating strong, long-lasting mentoring relationships that can make a difference in youth's lives" (2004, p.26, see also MacCallum and Beltman, 1999, pp. 29-30 for features of successful mentoring programs). The feedback in the Inspire evaluations is consistent with these findings. Schools that have good communication and support for mentors have a much higher retention rate of mentors (some returning for 3 years). Schools that do not have good communication with their mentors do not retain their mentors despite the mentors who left early reporting that the support from Inspire project staff was excellent (Inspire Mentor Feedback, 2005). Universities that establish good program structures and supports will also strengthen their relationships with their community partners.

Can mentoring be integrated into large-scale youth-serving institutions?

The ten research projects in Sipe's analysis of mentoring found that not allocating sufficient resources to programs (i.e. youth services attempting to provide mentoring programs on top of their already full work load) did not succeed. This is a vital finding in the context of university to school mentoring programs as a strategy for community engagement. The implication is that if universities implement mentoring programs as a strategy for community engagement, they must be provided with adequate funding for the required coordination, support and follow up to the schools (as partners) and the mentors.

Are there large numbers of adults with enough flexible time and emotional resources to take on the demands of mentoring at-risk youngsters [sic]?

The studies in Sipe's review found that over a six-month period, the BB/BS programs received over 2,500 inquiries, with 1,099 following up with a formal application. Inspire's recruitment reveals similar levels of actual application (less than 50 percent of inquiries lead to attendance at a training session). By being based at a university, Inspire, (like other university-based programs such as Project Partnerships at Victoria University and STAR at Murdoch University) has the whole student body to recruit mentors from. Inspire's partner organizations include two community-based mentor programs operating in the area that are unable to recruit enough mentors for their school-based programs with students at risk. Inspire recruited and trained the mentors, while these partners identify the young people requiring the support. In practice this means that the two local programs can continue to operate, maintaining service provision in the south, rather than losing them. Inspire mentors increased each year from 45 mentors in first semester 2004 to 160 in the second semester, 2006.

The literature cited in MacCallum and Beltman (1999) on school based mentoring indicates that outcomes for young people who are at risk of dis-engaging from formal education includes: academic improvement, increased achievements for particular subjects, increased retention and increased participation in class room or school activities. Other benefits include personal and social development, such as increased feelings of self-worth and self-confidence. This results in students being more willing to attempt school tasks (MacCallum and Beltman 1999). The observations from the partners of Inspire in 2004, 2005 and 2006 concur with these findings. Herrera's study of school-based mentoring in the U.S. is more cautious, stating: "youth involved in school-based mentoring appear to receive some benefits from their involvement, but these benefits may be limited" (2005, p.26), however.

So, can school-based mentoring programs that universities implement target low socio-economic areas as a strategy for community engagement? An evaluation of the Mentor Marketplace Programs reports that mentor programs can build community capacity by contributing to the capacity of participating communities to develop mentoring projects and by developing community capacity more broadly (Wilczynski, Ross, Schwartzkoff, Rintoul, & Reed-Gilbert, 2004). Lastly, the research by MacCallum & Beltman (1999, p.20) and feedback from Inspire mentors in 2004, 2005 and 2006 showed that mentors gained significant community-based experience, some finding employment opportunities from their volunteer work, and 95 per cent of Inspire mentors reported that they increased their communication skills, negotiation skills, conflict resolution skills, planning and time management in addition to their own self-confidence and feeling of being connected to their own community. Inspire received a commendation in the recent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) report, (2006) as a community

engagement strategy for Flinders University[1]. This indicates the validity of Higher Education implementing mentoring as a form of community engagement in low socio-economic areas.

CHANGING THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE – A CASE STUDY

(Note on terms: this section refers to 'teachers' as school teachers, 'teacher mentors' as a school teacher who is supervising a 'pre-service teacher' and 'students' and 'pre-service teachers' as education students on placement in schools).

This section will discuss how the success of the Inspire Peer Mentoring program has been embedded with the Education Degree, and also provided encouragement for the development of a new model for the teaching practicum program for the Flinders University School of Education.

The decision to introduce a double degree for education students provided the incentive for a staff forum held in December, 2003, to examine the possibility of changing the teaching practicum. The existing teaching practicum program had been operating for some years and was relatively easy to administer. Four year undergraduate students and two year graduate entry students were placed in schools for a four week practicum followed by a six week practicum in their third and first year respectively and both completed an eight week practicum in their fourth or second (final) year. For many students, the first experience they had in a school since their own school days, was not until after they had completed two or more years of their degree course and in some instances, students then discovered they no longer wished to pursue a career as a teacher.

At the same time, a number of students had volunteered to act as mentors for the Inspire in their second year (or first year graduate entry). Anecdotal evidence suggested these students were far better prepared for their teaching practicum and they demonstrated a greater awareness of the general operational aspects of a school. As one secondary principal remarked, the Inspire students 'knew what went on in the corridors of the school and their experience was not just restricted to a couple of classrooms.' As the Inspire program developed and expanded with more secondary and then some primary and junior primary schools becoming involved, more second year and first year graduate entry students were gaining a 'school experience' that clearly assisted their preparation for the teaching practicum the following year. Many of these Inspire students continued to mentor a student or students over an extended period, even through to the end of their degree.

Flinders School of Education staff advocated promoting schools as 'Communities of Enquiry' to support the pre-service (student) teachers in their developmental journey and self-development as co-learners, co-reflectors and co-teachers and to help them develop their professional identity. (Cattley, 2004)

It was recommended that this could be achieved by supporting groups of students in schools rather than students being allocated to specific teachers, providing students with a wide range of in-school experiences and integrating university studies with school experience.

A survey of some 300 teachers from government and non-government schools in March 2005 showed that over 80 per cent of teachers responding to the survey preferred student teachers to complete 20 days of observation in a school as a general 'school experience' in the student's second year (first year graduate entry). This school experience was not to be assessed and was to give student teachers an experience of the overall operation of a school and an indication of the complexity and value of teachers' work. The new 'Teaching Experience" program was introduced in semester one, 2006.

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[1] For more information on AUQA go to http://www.auqa.edu.au - Full report available at: http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/sai_reports/index.shtml. Flinders University under 'State and Regional Engagement' p.51.

All second year undergraduate students enrolled in a double degree (and all first year graduate entry students) would be placed in a school for 10 days of school experience in semester one and 10 days in semester two. This 'school experience' would be linked to specific education topics.

The first teaching practicum block of 20 days would be in semester two (school term 3) of the third year of the double degree course for undergraduates (the first year for graduate entry students). All students would then be placed for a six week block in school term 2 for their second (final) practicum the following year. Prior to commencing their second teaching practicum, all students are now required to spend 10 days in the school in school term 1, as preparation for the final practicum.

In addition, a Teaching Practicum Elective topic has been incorporated into the teaching experience program. Offering a range of choices, the teaching practicum elective also gives the Inspire mentors recognition for their work in schools. Inspire mentors are awarded a non graded pass in the teaching practicum elective after completing a minimum of 120 hours of peer mentoring, completing a reflective journal, or a 1,000 word reflection of how the experience has benefited them as a beginning teacher and gaining a brief report from their school.

The overarching notion was to develop a partnership with schools where the professional experience is seen as an essential element of teacher education and a positive way to create links between university students and staff and professionals in the field.

The recognition that in-school learning is the focus of professional experience, rather than mere assessment of the student teacher, creates a very different environment from traditional supervision practices. For pre-service (student) teachers, being welcomed into a school community leads to learning and professional growth that cannot be simulated in the university setting. The experience allows them to observe teachers in all aspects of their role, experiment with pedagogical practice and begin to understand how supportive learning environments are established.

Changing the language and terminology of the teaching experience was seen as a way of influencing changing attitudes and practices. School experience is different from a teaching practicum, which by necessity, has to be assessed. Supervising teachers are now referred to as teacher mentors and the university supervisor is now a university liaison to reflect the new role of linking university studies with the school experience.

Feedback from teachers who take on a mentoring role is overwhelmingly positive (Churchill & Walkington, 2002). They speak of the satisfaction they receive from fostering a future teacher. Teacher mentors also speak of what they learn from the student teacher and about how they are challenged to reflect on their own practices.

The trend towards a more broad based school experience is clearly developed in the OECD publication, *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*, OECD 2005

In particular, there is evidence that teachers who receive increased amounts of field experience remain in the profession at significantly higher rates than those prepared through largely campus-based programs.

> The duration of the field experience varies widely. Some programs provide for brief periods of classroom experience, others are year-long internships with regular teaching obligations. Most often, practice teaching occurs following coursework near the end of the teacher education program. However, this training is increasingly being incorporated throughout the entire teacher education program, especially in concurrent programs, and its scope is being broadened. Teacher trainees are asked to participate in school activities, observe classrooms, tutor young people and serve as teacher aides prior to actual practice teaching.

The trend towards establishing specific school and college or university partnerships that create linkages between teacher education coursework and school practice is gaining ground.

Actual school and classroom experience has the potential to provide teacher trainees with insight into the complex dynamics of schools and teaching, and opportunities to learn about strategies and their capacities for implementing them.

The contribution of field experiences to teacher preparation is enhanced when they are well prepared and based on a close co-operation between the teacher education institution and the schools; when student teachers are well prepared in subject matter and pedagogy before practice teaching; when teacher trainees are given opportunities to conduct research in the classroom, and to integrate the course-based and field work components; and when both teacher educators and supervising teachers receive appropriate and often shared training. (OECD, 2005)

Starting the new model for Teaching Experience, incorporating the new School Experience and a changed Teaching Practicum format, has not been without its challenges. It was far easier to organize and administer the former teaching practicum format.

A member of the senior leadership team from one metropolitan secondary school remarked that establishing the new school experience program into their whole school program had taken a significant amount of extra work, but that extra work had been worth the effort in creating a far superior teaching experience for the student teachers. He especially noted that second year students teachers had 'crossed over the line' from being a student teacher to becoming a beginning teacher much earlier in their degree program.

One principal of a metropolitan primary school refused to take university students for the school experience program as 'it was too much extra work'.

Principals of country schools attended an information session at Flinders University and voiced an opinion that the new school experience was 'a metropolitan based program'. Modifications had to be made to the structure of the school experience, originally intended to facilitate visits to schools on a one day a week basis and linked to specific education study topics at the university, to allow students to gain experience in country schools, especially relevant as the majority of teaching vacancies are in country locations.

There were problems for students who worked a part-time job and now needed to make time to visit a school on a one day a week basis, similar problems for students with children, for students who rely on public transport and for students who attended university part time.

Initial confusion occurred with the use of the new term 'school experience' along with the term 'teaching practicum'. When senior school personnel were first asked to accept students for school experience placements, they often mistook the placement to be a teaching practicum. When later asked to accept teaching practicum placements, many principals and school coordinators remarked 'we already have 10 of your student teachers in the school – we can't take any more!'

The number of actual places available in schools presented an additional challenge. With over 250 second year and around 90 graduate entry students to place, the first indications were that fewer than 200 places had been secured. Many hours of telephoning schools and, at times, pleading with senior school staff after lengthy explanation of the benefits and intentions of the school experience, were necessary to gain the additional places required.

Expectations by academic staff also needed clarification back in the university. Some academic staff responsible for linking the school experience to the students' university studies expected far too much of the schools and the students and have had to review their students' workloads. Also, an inconsistency occurred between the expectations for assessment by the topic coordinators for the middle school and secondary school topics and the topic coordinators for the junior primary

and primary topics. Students became frustrated and confused while these inconsistencies were resolved.

In spite of the difficulties and challenges experienced by the Teaching Experience Centre staff, early indications are that the new school experience is having a positive influence on the development of students' understandings of the school learning environment, on the development of their professional skills and on their awareness of educational settings as their future worksites.

Students who in the past had often questioned the relevance of some university topics are now acknowledging the links between their studies and the way children learn. In their curriculum studies tutorial workshops each week, students are enthusiastically talking about their school experiences and showing a depth of understanding and reflection not previously demonstrated.

While the difference between schools was first seen as a further challenge to students, it soon became apparent that students were developing a richer understanding of the nature of schools when they discussed their experiences with their peers and with their university tutors.

Furthermore, teachers and schools are developing approaches to collaborative mentoring rather than the previous 'one teacher to one student teacher' model and, in some instances student teachers have been encouraged to keep in touch with 'their' school throughout their teacher education.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, if mentoring programs are adequately resourced, with 'good practice' structures and support, mentoring is an exciting strategy for community engagement for the tertiary sector that has been acknowledged by the AUQA framework. By using tertiary students, university's can directly contribute to increasing retention rates in their local secondary schools and build the capacity of local programs, staff, young people and their own student body. Additionally, mentor programs can be embedded both across all disciplines, and within specific faculties to involve university students in volunteer work in their own communities. Schools can access tertiary students and Higher Education sites as a resource for the community and create opportunities for university students across all discipline areas to develop their graduate skills. In the words of one of the Principals involved: "It's win-win all round!" (Lindsay Bowey, Principal, Forbes Primary School).

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