Towards an inclusive student partnership: rethinking mentors' disposition and holistic competency development in near-peer mentoring

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While recent years have seen increasing initiatives to engage students as partners in higher education, some students tend to be privileged yet others are excluded based on certain selection standards. This paper situates near-peer mentoring within the 'students as partners' context, and investigates the mentoring experience of 3 student mentors whose self-perceived dispositions seemed 'unfitting' to the 'ideal' mentor standards in research and practices. These three cases presented how mentors' mentoring practices were influenced by their dispositions, and identified a growth pattern in holistic competencies which could in return benefit these student mentors' future development. A conceptual model has been designed to capture the potential relationship between mentoring, mentor dispositions and holistic competency development. Both theoretical and practical implications have been made to increase inclusive participation and to provide equitable learning opportunities for more students in higher education.

Keywords: peer mentoring; disposition; 21st century skills; student partnership; case study

Word count: 6922

Introduction

In recent years, 'students as partners' has been a popular concept in higher education which advocates student engagement in shaping teaching and learning underpinned by principles of reciprocity and collaboration (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). Some scholars believe that student partnership emerges as a timely response to cultivate all-rounded graduates in today's universities (Barnes, Goldring, Bestwick, & Wood, 2010; Healey et al., 2014) where teachers are constantly found lack of

resources, expertise and time in class to develop students' holistic competencies (Chan, Fong, Luk, & Ho, 2017). By holistic competencies, we refer to different types of generic skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, and problem-solving,), positive values and attitudes (e.g., consideration and respect) for student development (Chan & Yeung, 2019, p. 2).

Among a variety of approaches to engage students as partners (e.g., teaching assistants; co-researchers), and to enhance students' holistic competencies alongside teacher involvement is through peer mentoring (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008; Hogan, Fox, & Barratt-See, 2017; Reeves et al., 2019). One of the advantages of peer mentoring is that students are positioned as peer mentors who have valuable perspectives and expertise to contribute, which empowers them to engage in their own learning and development instead of being passive recipients (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Werder, Thibou, & Kaufer, 2012). In some research, given that the mentor and mentees do not strictly have a peer relationship, the term 'near-peer' mentoring has been adopted to describe 'a more senior learner providing guidance and support to … new junior learner(s)' in contrast to a mentorship which involves prominent hierarchical power relations (e.g., teacher-student relationship) (Alkinla, 2018, p.18; Zaniewski & Reinholz, 2016).

However, despite the benefits associated with peer mentoring, some scholars are concerned that this type of student partnership operates on an 'elite' or 'boutique' model that only includes a small number of students (Kuh, 2007; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). For example in near-peer mentoring, teachers may 'select' students to become mentors based on certain standards (Holt & Fifer, 2018; Terrion & Leonard, 2007), usually favouring those who already appear capable to contribute in expected ways (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). If we understand peer mentoring as a way to increase student partnership in developing holistic competencies, we need to address further questions as to whose partnership we are actually

promoting, and ultimately how we could balance inclusion and selection (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016). Understanding who are and are not involved in near-peer mentoring is important because it helps to problematize the normative discourse in student partnership and to shed light on the potential risk of exclusivity of an initiative that sets out to 'include' students (Healey et al., 2014).

To that end, based on a near-peer mentoring programme in Hong Kong, this study researches the mentoring experience of three student mentors whose self-perceived dispositions seemed unfitting to the 'ideal' selection standard. By highlighting the complex role of mentor disposition and holistic competency development in near-peer mentoring, we aim to argue for 'expanded eligibility' of peer mentors in favour of more equitable student participation.

Holistic Competency Development as the Near-peer Mentoring Outcome

Research on mentors' outcomes in near-peer mentoring points to a growth of their holistic competencies, but the number of relevant studies is rather limited (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012). Among the existing literatures in higher education, enhanced communication, leadership skills, self-awareness and confidence are commonly identified as peer mentors' benefits after participation (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Hogan et al., 2017; Jackling & McDowall, 2008; Shrestha, May, Edirisingha, Burke, & Linsey, 2009). Additional gains also include altruistic awareness and empathy (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012), teamwork skills (Jackling & McDowall, 2008), and socialising skills (Shrestha et al., 2009). The above literatures cover a range of disciplines (e.g., accounting, teacher education, midwifery), and utilize different research methods including written reflections (Heirdsfield et al., 2008), surveys (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012), interviews, group discussions, informal meetings, or a combination of them (Hogan et al., 2017; Jackling & McDowall, 2008;

Shrestha et al., 2009). While it is evidenced that mentoring benefits peer mentors to some extent, not every student is entitled to serve as a mentor due to inclusivity issues.

Inclusion of Peer Mentors as Student Partners

By inclusivity issues, we mean at present much peer mentoring work reported in the literature may be biased towards certain types of students. For example, except for Hogan et al.'s (2017) study, all the other studies reviewed in the above section deliberately selected students to become peer mentors. Two studies specifically emphasized their selection criteria. Jackling and McDowall (2008) introduced that they adopted a very 'rigorous recruitment process' (p.451) where students were required to submit their curriculum vitae, written applications and demonstrate excellent academic performance. In Shrestha et al. (2009)'s research, lecturers selected student mentors who have both strong interpersonal and academic skills.

Student partnership of all forms, including peer mentoring, is dedicated to democratising practices in an education system inherently nested with power. And yet, 'an uncritical adoption of student engagement practices might reinforce existing hierarchies amongst the tutor- student and student- student relationships' to the extent that the 'presence of institutional and social power relations can, therefore, lead to the silencing of some students' voices' (Robinson, 2012, p. 10). By selecting students, teachers' authoritative power over students is reproduced instead of democratised. Felten et al. (2013) pointed out that in student partnership literature, none of the reported selection criteria are intentionally set to exclude certain students, but they do in practice narrow the range of participants who might make contributions.

That said, full participation in student partnership is never easy to achieve. Bovill et al. (2016) explained that this requires all stakeholders (e.g., teachers, senior management, society) to reframe their perceptions of students who have often been marginalized or stigmatised. Perceptions of what is considered 'good' or 'competent' can be entrenched,

unobtrusive, and highly contextual (Felten, 2013). Therefore, to understand the mechanism and experience of peer mentoring, we need to first contextualise our focus and understand who are considered 'ideal' in the selection of peer mentors.

Dispositions of an 'Ideal' Mentor

In recent years, there have been an increased reference to 'disposition' in educational research, especially in the field of teacher education (West et al., 2018). 'Ideal' dispositions of teachers have been discussed in terms of personality (e.g., extroversion, enthusiastic), social justice constructs (e.g., fairness, attitude to diversity), pragmatic qualities (e.g., communication skills), and efficacy characteristics (e.g., resourcefulness) (Wake & Bunn, 2016).

These varied clusters of 'ideal' teacher dispositions have acutely reflected a lack of clear-cut definition of 'disposition' (Damen, 2007; Welch, Pitts, Tenini, Kuenlen, & Wood, 2010). Schussler (2006) points out that dispositions are constructed over time by a complicated set of elements such as an individual's past experience, beliefs, family background and so forth. Disposition forms a filter through which the individual's future thoughts, behaviour, and experiences will be affected (Stooksberry, Schussler, & Bercaw, 2009).

Following this line, the current research conceptualises disposition as near-peer mentors' perceptions of themselves underpinned by their past history, mind-sets, and personality traits, which would also influence their mentoring practices. Although disposition is not a frequent concept in mentoring literature to describe 'ideal' mentors, abundant studies suggesting a selection criteria (or at least a preference) as to who should be a mentor can be identified (e.g., Batty, Rudduck & Wilson, 1999; Heeralal, 2017; Pennanen, Heikkinen, & Tynjälä, 2018), and findings of some of these studies overlap with 'ideal' teacher dispositions. For example, some of the 'ideal' teacher dispositions, such as good

communication skills and extroversion mentioned in Wake and Bunn (2006)'s study above, have also been considered desirable for mentors but labelled as 'ideal characteristics' or 'traits'[1] (e.g., Rhodes & DuBois 2008; Rose, 2003).

Among the rich literature body researching 'ideal' mentors, not much pertains to peer mentors (Holt & Fifer, 2018). Terrion and Leonard (2007) conducted a literature review categorising recurring student peer mentor descriptors found in mentoring research. They came up with a taxonomy demonstrating ten desirable dispositions such as communication skills, empathy, and trustworthiness. Colvin and Ashman (2010) highlighted that peer mentors need to have a connecting link to their mentees, and have the knowledge and resources to inform mentees when needed. Douglass, Smith and Smith (2013) compared 426 student mentees and 13 mentors' perceptions on 'ideal' mentor characteristics based on validated surveys, and revealed that being knowledgeable and having good communication skills are recognised as important by both mentors and mentees. A more recent quantitative study by Holt and Fifer (2018) proposed self-efficacy and attachment style as indicators for selecting good peer mentors under collegial settings, arguing that students with lower self-efficacy and avoidant attachment style are less supportive as a peer mentor. These studies believe that institutions should determine the best student mentors to fulfil this role, and call for further research on and attention to mentor selection process. Table 1 shows a list of peer mentor dispositions highlighted by the above literatures, which also influences how the current study understands 'ideal' peer mentors.

<Table 1>

Model of Selective Mentorship

[1] It is not the focus of current paper to distinguish nominal differences between 'disposition', 'characteristics' and 'traits'. 'Disposition' would be adopted hereafter when there is overlap in meaning.

Although dispositions for 'ideal' mentors slightly varied, the constant research on this topic indicates that a person's disposition is an important element regarding whether s/he should be encouraged to be a mentor. Based on the literature review, Figure 1 presents a model capturing the dominating understanding/practices of peer mentoring, mentor dispositions and mentors' holistic competency development. As reviewed, mentors' dispositions are often understood as the *presage* of mentoring, i.e. part of the selection criteria granting privilege access to certain students. Therefore, the participation of peer mentoring (*process*) is selective, and the possible *outcomes* of serving as a mentor (i.e. holistic competency development) is also limited to those selected.

<Figure 1>

The model has raised an interesting yet under-researched inquiry in student partnership studies. We acknowledge that certain dispositions (e.g., empathy, passion) contribute to a more supportive mentorship, but whether these dispositions should serve as the benchmark or even the gatekeeper of selecting mentors is questioned. While research supports that 'ideal' mentors upon selection contribute to mutually beneficial relationship, do those mentors who do not possess 'ideal' dispositions necessarily suffer from negative mentoring experience without any gains in holistic competencies, and thus should not be granted the opportunity to mentor?

Current Study

Therefore, this study focused on the experience of three mentors who have certain self-perceived dispositions that do not match with the 'ideal' dispositions reported in the literature. Through examining their mentoring experience, we seek to understand how the

'unfitting' disposition affected their mentoring practices and if they were able to develop any holistic competencies. The threefold research goal is captured by the following questions:

(1) How did mentors with 'unfitting' self-perceived dispositions to the 'ideal' standard perceive their mentoring experience?

(2) How did their self-perceived 'unfitting' dispositions affect their actual mentoring practices?

(3) Did these mentors develop holistic competencies via mentorship?

Methodology

Research Background

The current research is part of a larger scale study where participated mentors served for a 3-4 day holistic competency development programme designed for over 500 secondary school students in Hong Kong. Students were put into groups of 4-7 and each group was randomly assigned a mentor, who was either a university student or a fresh graduate. Recruiting posters (including a programme introduction and benefits of mentoring) were advertised on university websites, noticeboard and sent to students via bulk emails. Mentors were subsequently recruited on a voluntary first-come-first-serve basis and no preference on their disposition or academic achievement was given. Before the programme, all mentors were required to attend a two-hour training workshop.

The programme included indoor and outdoor activities aimed to develop both students and peer mentors' holistic competencies such as teamwork, empathy, communication, self-understanding, leadership, responsibility and respect. Each group of students was accompanied by a mentor in all activities. The mentors were expected to guide and encourage their group, as well as to share how they coped with their secondary school life and transition to university. They also observed, assessed, and assisted in the holistic competency development of their mentees.

Participants and Data Collection

As this research advocates equitable student participation as peer mentors, we consider it inappropriate if we (as researchers or programme organizers) or the mentees decide which student mentors have 'unfitting' dispositions and then recruit them for research purpose. This would potentially exert negative influence on our research participants if they were informed that they were considered 'unfit' by the researchers or their mentees. Therefore, a self-report method might appear more reasonable and 'innocuous'.

To recruit mentors who perceived their dispositions as 'unfitting' to mentor other peers, 49 programme mentors participated in focus group interviews after the programme. Five one-hour focus group interviews with 7-12 mentors per group were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured and covered (1) mentors' benefits and challenges in mentoring students; (2) how they assessed students' holistic competencies; and (3) their mentoring practices (they were asked to provide concrete examples and relate to their past experiences/dispositions when applicable). Particularly, the last part (3) contributed to recruiting self-perceived 'unfitting' mentors. We specifically paid attention to mentors' negative expression about their disposition and their mentoring practices (if any) in the interviews. Some examples are 'at first I did not consider myself capable' and 'I think I am too introverted to be a good mentor'. Five mentors reported 'unfitting' dispositions in their interviews.

Subsequently, 3 out of these 5 student mentors agreed to sit individual interviews that lasted around half an hour each. In the individual interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on their responses in the focus group interviews that related to our three research questions. Specifically, participants were asked to provide more personal background information and how they perceived themselves. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and allowed participants to code-switch to English where necessary.

To triangulate mentors' perceived mentoring experience, mentees also completed a bilingual (Chinese and English) post-programme survey to reflect on issues such as level of engagement in the programme, received level of support from mentors, and perceived gains based on a five-point Likert scale. Among a total of 363 questionnaires collected, we selected those from our target mentors' groups (N=17). All participants signed informed consent to participate in this study, and the study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of a research-intensive university.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings of the three mentors (including focus group and individual interviews) were first transcribed verbatim by two bilingual researchers into Chinese. Transcripts were thoroughly read through by the researchers. In this first run-through of the data, mentors' self-perceived dispositions were marked by a tag (e.g., timid, introverted) and the researchers cross-checked their interpretations to reach a consensus. In the second run, transcripts were further organised through 'chunking' of meaningful texts (Huberman & Miles, 1998), thus each organised segment represents a distinguishable idea. Open-coding was then employed to identify tentative themes. In the third phase, the produced codes/themes were reexamined through the lens of research questions, discussed, and confirmed by the research group. Pertinent quotes were highlighted and translated into English by bilingual researchers.

To triangulate the mentors' interviews, their mentees' responses to the post-programme survey were singled out, specifically on responses to two items 'received level of support from mentors' and 'overall level of engagement in the programme'. As the other questions from mentees' questionnaires did not bear direct relevance to the current research (e.g., mentees' opinions on a certain activity), only the aforementioned two were given

specific focus. Data related to these two items was computed for means and standard deviation through SPSS.

Findings

This section presents three cases (in pseudonyms) in which the interviewees' self-perceived dispositions did not match those of the 'ideal' mentors reported in the literature. Responses of mentees from the three mentors' groups were shown within each case.

Lily: from a Sheltered Upbringing to Understanding Others

One of the mentors, Lily, described her mentoring experience as a journey where she 'learnt to understand others while contributing'. Mentoring provided an opportunity for Lily to reflect on her sheltered self, and acquire increased awareness to understand others.

Lily is a doctoral student in her early-30s, born in Hong Kong but grew up in Singapore. She moved back to Hong Kong with her family after her undergraduate study in Singapore. Born and raised in a well-off and happy family, Lily described her life path as 'very smooth and peaceful'. Apart from her campus life, she did not have much experience in the outside world. Lily recalled that her PhD supervisor once said that she 'had been living in her own protective world and was not down-to-earth'. Lily might not be considered a traditional 'ideal' mentor as she seemed to lack the experience and social awareness to sympathize with mentees and provide them with substantial help.

Despite her self-perceived disposition, Lily reported good mentorship with her mentees and she specifically referred to a mentee who appeared to be very quiet and passive in the beginning. Being aware of her scarce social experience, Lily realised that she 'could not judge anyone hastily'. When the mentee confided in her some troubles he had encountered in the past, Lily said she 'listened patiently and paid careful attention though not

being able to directly respond'. Gradually, Lily had a feeling that 'their mutual trust and bonding developed over time' and felt reassured to see her mentee gradually eased into the programme and even became a group leader in some activities. Lily commented:

> We should not judge others easily and have got to understand that we have different educational and family backgrounds.

The scenario shows that Lily was able to develop a compassionate attitude towards her mentees through the mentoring. She became more aware of the different educational and family backgrounds of her mentees and learnt about more possible ways of living in the world. Mentoring also nudged Lily to reflect on her own disposition, which helped her become more understanding to realities:

> Some mentees shared with me their family issues that I could not help resolving. The experience has brought me back to reality. My family background, upbringing and work life have been very peaceful and smooth. The programme has made me feel that I have been living in my ideal world and what reality really is.

Lily's reported successful mentoring experience was supported by her six mentees' survey responses (Level of support from mentor: M = 4.71, SD = .49; level of engagement in the programme: M = 4.86, SD = .38). The means are considered very high on a five point Likert scale, which indicated Lily's mentees perceived to have gained ample support from her and also exhibited high level of engagement in the programme.

Leona: from Timidity to Enhanced Self-confidence

Leona started her mentoring experience as a passive participant who could not imagine herself as a mentor because she perceived herself as 'an introvert and a little timid'. However, during the mentoring, Leona was pushed out of her comfort zone to lead mentees and found

her introverted disposition helpful in engaging other timid participants. In return, she developed more confidence.

Leona is in her mid-20s and has just started work as a research assistant. As she reflected, her upbringing has had an impact on her personality. When she was in secondary school, she did not get along well with her classmates and therefore she spent a lot of time alone. Leona perceived herself as passive and that she 'did not like to socialise and talk'. She also did not know how to interact with others and carry on a conversation. It would normally take her some time to warm up before talking to people she was not familiar with.

In the interview, Leona mentioned that before this programme, she always tended to think that others were much better than her, which indicates a lack of self-confidence. She claimed that when she made mistakes, she would always doubt her own ability. As she thought a good mentor needed to be outgoing and have good communication skills, she was hesitant to take up mentor's role at first. She recalled that if it had not been her work supervisor and programme facilitator's encouragement, she would not have become a mentor. According to Leona, though not confident enough to be a mentor at first, the mentoring experience was unexpectedly beneficial. Leona reflected on how she managed the mentoring task:

> At first, there was silence on my table most of the time. I did not know what to say to my mentees. […] But as I was a mentor, I become more aware of my responsibilities (to lead and guide). When I led a group of four students, I needed to be responsible. Gradually I became more confident in each run of the programme and no longer had any problem standing up in public to introduce myself.

Being a mentor drove Leona out of her comfort zone and pushed her to pursue leadership as the mentor's role required her to do so. Leona recalled that as the programme proceeded, her mentees gradually grew to trust her and asked her for guidance. One noteworthy example would be her interaction with introverted girls in her group:

> Especially for girls like me, when I asked them questions on the spot, they would just keep quiet, but when I asked them in private, they would express their views and thoughts. So if we want to be able to communicate with them, we need to use different methods. If we use the same method for everyone, we may end up neglecting some people.

Leona noticed some girls in her group were also too shy to share their views in public. Given Leona could deeply resonate with them, she accordingly adjusted her approach and asked their opinions privately. The girls were then willing to share their thoughts with Leona. After the programme, Leona reflected that:

> I am normally led by someone. This time I was the leader and this made me feel very good. I felt a sense of success and my self-confidence has improved.

As her mentorship improved, Leona also gained a sense of satisfaction. Leona became more aware of her potential to lead and guide. The mentoring experience allowed Leona to develop and expand her capabilities, which in turn improved her self-confidence. In alignment with her self-report, Leona's mentees also provided very positive feedback in the post-programme questionnaire. All her mentees ranked the highest scale regarding their received support from the mentor ($M = 5$, $SD = 0$), and three out of four thought they were very engaged in the programme ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.5$).

Ella: from an 'Outsider' to Skills Development in Communication and Mentoring

Ella, a mentor who described herself as an 'outsider to Hong Kong culture', reported that the mentoring experience was 'unexpectedly fulfilling' through which she developed communication and mentoring skills. Her lack of common grounds with mentees became a

valuable resource that endeared her to the group members, and motivated her to develop good communication and mentoring skills to sustain good mentorship.

Ella is in her mid-20s, just finished her studies in the US. She spent most of her childhood and teenage life in Australia and the US. At a young age, she left her family and moved to study overseas by herself. Unlike Lily who was accompanied by her Hong Kong families in her sojourn abroad, Ella grew up with fairly little exposure to the Hong Kong culture. Ella therefore described herself as independent and mature, as well as outgoing and cheerful.

Ella demonstrated certain 'ideal' dispositions of a good mentor (e.g., outgoing, cheerful), but given her foreign background, Ella also confided that the programme organisers were concerned at the beginning that she might not be 'very engaged in the programme and be able to understand the issues Hong Kong students were facing'. She thought that having a connected link with mentees is beneficial and important in a mentor-mentee relationship, and worried that she was not a qualified candidate.

And yet surprisingly, Ella reported that her seemingly irrelevant cultural background actually even helped her get close to the mentees at the start:

> They (mentees) got interested in my experience abroad and asked me to share more (about this experience).

Although her unique background seemed to have facilitated the mentorship, Ella was aware of the existing cultural gap that could hinder further progress. As she recalled, she paid efforts to understand her mentees' needs, and developed different communication skills to suit different people.

> I don't share common background (with mentees), (so) I put myself in the mentees' shoes, understand what they needed and try to help them. […] we need to understand

> what suits them and how they communicate among themselves in order to communicate with them more easily.

Apart from communication skills, Ella also acquired other useful mentoring skills. She thought it was in the everyday interactive mentoring practices that she 'learnt how to strike a balance between being friendly and playing the mentor's role'.

During this process, Ella added that her 'cheerful personality has helped (her) work well with the students'. Although her international background might not seem desirable, Ella's fun and extroverted side has enabled her to blend into the mentee group easily. Ella was happy to share her views on the mentoring experience and how the programme organizers acknowledged her performance:

> (Programme organizers said I am) very enthusiastic and engaged and able to spot the 'avoider' and knew how to engage and motivate them. […] It was overall a refreshing experience for me. I felt fulfilling and enjoyed being a mentor.

In Ella's case, she developed communication and mentoring skills which would be beneficial for her in the future. A main concern preventing Ella from being an 'ideal' mentor was her idiosyncratic background. However, Ella reported that her culturally unique disposition actually facilitated her mentoring at the start, and helped her eased into the programme better. Ella's seven mentees reported a mean score of 4.14 and 4.29 in terms of mentor support (SD = .69) and programme engagement (SD = .76). This indicates although Ella did not perceive herself as an 'ideal' mentor, she was able to carry out mentoring tasks as well as others.

Discussion

These cases presented how individual mentors perceived their mentoring experience and identified a growth pattern in holistic competencies shaped by their self-perceived

dispositions. The results challenged previous 'ideal' dispositions of mentors by demonstrating that 'unfitting' mentors, who are often excluded in peer mentoring (e.g., Shrestha et al., 2009), could also benefit from and contribute to the mentoring. The discussion first discusses 3 mentors' complicated mentoring experience influenced by their dispositions, and then relates the findings to expanding student participation in peer mentoring.

Three cases: Mentors' Dispositions, Mentoring Practices, and Holistic Competencies

According to the 'ideal' mentor research that values empathy (Terrion & Leonard, 2007) and mentor's expertise to provide guidance for mentees (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), Lily, due to her scarce social experience and overprotective upbringing, may not fall into the 'ideal' mentor category. However, the mutually satisfactory mentorship was to some extent influenced by Lily's dispositions, forming a filter through which she decided how to guide and respond to her mentees. As well documented in teacher education literatures, the instructor's dispositions are key components to successful teaching practices and student learning (Thornton, 2006; Wake & Bunn, 2016). Lily's rather 'idealistic' disposition surprisingly became a helpful cause to her mentoring practices (e.g., being aware of her lack of world experience, Lily mentioned that she did not judge mentees' easily). Being well protected, Lily's mentoring approach also appeared to be less aggressive and didactic (e.g., listened with patience). It was in this disposition-filtered mentoring that she learnt to understand others better, as other 'fitting' mentors do in the literature (Hughes, Boyd, & Dykstra, 2010). The opportunity to mentor also provides possibilities for mentors to reflect on their dispositions (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012) — as in Lily's case, she had an acute perception of her lack of social awareness when she needed to guide and respond to a group of mentees (e.g., when she could not help resolve mentees' issues, she started to reflect on her life trajectory).

Similarly, according to Leona's self-perceived dispositions, she lacked some of the dispositions of an 'ideal' mentor discussed in the literature. She was not confident (Holt & Fifer, 2018) and lacked the skills to lead, communicate and socialise with mentees (Terrion & Leonard, 2010). However, these assumed 'drawbacks' did not pose insurmountable challenges for Leona to establish good relationship with her mentees.

Leona's enhanced sense of self-confidence can also be seen resulted from the interplay between her dispositions and the mentoring practices. Given her assigned identity as a mentor, Leona had to make a change to lead and guide her mentees. As noted by Reeves et al., (2019, p.41), peer mentors are 'permitted a degree of access to a community of practice of educators', a 'reconfigured relationship' that could possibly lead to 'greater responsibility and aligning of expectations in a learning encounter' (Elkington, 2014, p. 178). Although her disposition would make this change difficult at the beginning, being shy and introverted also enabled her to possess a sensitivity not commonly found in other mentors. Her sensitivity guided her to adjust her mentoring approach when needed, as can be observed in her private talks with shy girls who shared a similar disposition with Leona. Her successful mentoring experience shaped by her original dispositions further enhanced her self-confidence to serve as a mentor, which eventually led to more self-acknowledgement to become a leader.

Although in some cultures mentors from different cultural backgrounds might be considered valuable, in eastern cultures where collectivism and sameness are celebrated (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005), Ella's identity as an 'ideal' mentor is contested. However, her mentoring experience was also fulfilling. Ella's different cultural identity inclined her to be more respectful to mentees' different communication styles (e.g., trying to put herself in mentees' shoes). As her skills developed, Ella also appeared more capable assuming the mentor's role (e.g., learnt how to draw the line between being a friend and a mentor). Meanwhile, as supported by some research that being cheerful and high-spirited

contribute to mentor-mentee relationship (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008), Ella's cheerful side has been helpful in forming a good relationship with mentees, and her mentoring practices were to some extent influenced by and processed through her active personality. Although she might not be able to resonate with some local issues, Ella developed other ways to help her succeed in mentoring (e.g., influencing her mentees with her activeness). This indicates mentoring practices can be influenced by a complex set of dispositional interplay — mentors who lack a cultural bond with mentees can compensate for this with other useful dispositions (e.g., being cheerful and active).

Expanding Student Participation in a Students as Partners Context

As pointed out by Paechter (1996, p.83), 'what appears to be liberating has a coercive side, [and] that what attempts to include will also simultaneously exclude'. With increasing initiatives promoting student partnership in higher education, it is important to bear in mind that some students tend to be privileged while others discouraged (Felten et al., 2013). Central to this exclusion are problematic dichotomies that dominate education discourse, constructing 'a hierarchy in which one side of the opposition is superior to the other' (Lefstein, Trachtenberg-Maslaton, & Pollak, 2017, p.419).

But it is not easy to break the grips of the dichotomous discourse, because most of the selection standards do not set out to exclude students, but to ensure the quality of a certain programme (Felten et al., 2013). That said, findings of the current study provide two new angles to approach this issue in near-peer mentoring.

First, mentors who are in a traditional sense 'less fitting' could also develop certain holistic competencies while mentoring, which feeds back to the overall quality of the mentoring programme. Cases in our study correspond with available research suggesting that mentors gain enhanced understandings of others (Hughes et al., 2010), greater confidence and

leadership skills (Hogan et al., 2017), and mentoring skills (Beltman & Schaebens, 2012) through mentoring practices. Peer mentoring provides valuable learning opportunities for mentors to actively improve themselves to fulfill expectations of this role (e.g., to become confident, to understand mentees and themselves, and to mentor well).

Second, it should be noted that among the 49 programme mentors, only 5 considered themselves somewhat 'unfit', i.e. the other mentors believed they are capable of meeting what they think the progamme is expecting. This raises another question if we are to expand student participation: *even if we lift selection standards in recruiting mentors, how can we lift the invisible standards entrenched in students' minds telling them only those with strong academic records or holistic competencies are entitled to participate?* Underpinning this dilemma are social norms and expectations (e.g., extroverted students are more engaging then introverted ones) that have been established for decades or even centuries, which also implicitly penetrate current practices to engage 'promising' students as partners (Matthews, 2017). It takes time to transform stakeholders' perceptions of students from emphasizing perceived deficits to acknowledging them as distinct capacities and assets that contribute to student diversity (Bovill et al., 2016).

Inclusive Model of Mentoring, Disposition, and Holistic Competencies

In response to increasing calls to expand student engagement as partners (Felten et al., 2013; O'Shea, 2018), we consider it important to reconceptualise the relationship between mentors' dispositions, mentoring practices and mentors' holistic competency development. Hence, an inclusive partnership model in peer mentoring is proposed in Figure 2 (right side).

Compared to the dominating selective model (left, introduced before in the literature review), the inclusive model sees peer mentoring as an opportunity open to all students to engage in the learning community and become partners in higher education. In the presage,

mentors' dispositions are no longer the 'gatekeepers' for students to become mentors. In other words, students with different dispositions are all perceived and accepted as legitimate peer mentors.

Encouraging expanded partnership as peer mentors (as indicated in the presage) also makes an impact on the mentoring process. In the process, instead of participation of selective students, all students, especially those traditionally perceived as 'unqualified', are encouraged to recognise their value and potential. Additionally, student mentors are made aware of the potential development benefits for themselves, which is often downplayed and neglected in practice in comparison to mentee benefits. With this awareness, student mentors are expected to be more motivated to engage meaningfully and to constantly reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

Meanwhile, through participating in peer mentoring, peer mentors also gain rich educational opportunities to develop their *holistic competencies* (e.g., Leona became more confident; Lily learnt to be more understanding). As the *outcome*, in the inclusive model, holistic competency development is not exclusive to those who are selected, but ideally to all those who participate.

Due to the limited number of cases presented in this study, we regard this model tentative and invite future studies to test it using larger sample sizes. That said, the inclusive model challenges the existing practices to go beyond only partnering with students who are 'capable'. The reconceptualization will help provide a new understanding of the expanding student partnership as peer mentors.

<Figure 2>

Implications

This study contributes to the current literature and educational practices both on a knowledge and practical level. On a knowledge level, the study challenges the conventional pre-determined 'ideal' image of a peer mentor. We acknowledge the benefits of selecting high-caliber mentors based on 'ideal' dispositions as these mentors could possibly take up their role more aptly, but these standards should not be the gatekeepers to discourage or even expel 'deviant' applicants from participating as mentors. Understanding mentoring, disposition and mentoring practices is important because it shows regardless of whether students possess 'ideal' dispositions, any individual should be given the opportunity to be a mentor as each individual has something unique to gain as well as to offer, and most importantly, they grow from this mentoring process. Additionally, the study invites more deliberation on the possible 'exclusion' side of a series of student partnership initiatives. Acknowledging the expanded eligibility of student mentors helps promote more equitable learning opportunities among different students in higher education.

Changing the 'ideal' mentor mindset is crucial to underpin further moves on a practical level. First, while teachers are grappling to foster students' holistic competency development, incorporating a peer mentoring component into curriculum can be a starting point to engage students as partners in developing holistic competencies. This is beneficial to shift the current education landscape into a more collaborative context where students contribute equally, though not necessarily in the same way as teachers, to shaping their own learning and development (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Near-peer mentoring represents an effective approach to engage students as partners for a more authentic and self-initiated interaction with their education experience (Reeves et al., 2019).

Second, achieving high levels of inclusive partnership in peer mentoring requires efforts from all levels. On a practical level, teachers/programme organizers could make it explicit that no selection criteria is predestined in recruiting mentors. They could also provide

less typical examples (e.g., how introverted mentors make contributions to mentoring) in recruitment to encourage diverse students to join. Additional efforts (e.g., private conversation; incentives) could be made to motivate traditionally 'marginalised' students (e.g., new students; minority students; introverted students). On an educational level, teachers and relevant personnel need to help students appreciate the value and benefits of engaging as peer mentors. The awareness is important as students are less likely to participate if they have no sound understanding of what this partnership entails (Felton et al., 2013). On a cultural level, it takes time to inculcate a message that all students' identity, ideas and abilities are unique and valuable. This starts from students and teachers actively reflecting on their perceptions of different students and how such perceptions influence their beliefs and attitudes towards them. Institutions need to create more student partnership opportunities to enable more participation.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation is that the study is based merely on mentors' self-reports and fails to include mentees' detailed perspectives. This is because a large proportion of student mentees reported that they thought the programme's schedule was 'too tight', and in order not to overtax our participants, our research only solicits mentees' survey data. We are aware that the small number of mentees each group might not make a very strong case for quantitative analysis, but under such circumstance, it does provide a direct evidence that the mentees under research perceive their mentoring experience positive and supplement mentors' interviews to some extent. That said, the results would be better triangulated if mentees were interviewed for more in-depth understandings on the mutual mentor relationship and their dispositions. Future research may also look at data across a peer mentor cohort to develop a continuum of dispositions, which will allow better validation of our proposed model.

While the study reports mentors' holistic competency gains, it remains unclear whether such development is temporary (as the interview took place soon after the programme ended) or long-lasting. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design to investigate mentors' holistic competency development in peer mentoring. It may also be interesting to adopt rigorous pre-/post-test designs to measure certain types of mentors' holistic competency development (e.g., leadership skills; empathy) before and after peer mentoring.

Conclusions

Student partnership is gaining momentum in higher education worldwide, but there is a pressing need to problematize who are selected as the partners and the potential inclusivity issues it reproduces. While the study truly values the potential benefits brought by engaging students as partners, it has also led us to question whether we have 'achieved a more equitable tertiary landscape' (O'Shea, 2018, p. 19). If we consider peer mentoring as a beneficial way to promote student participation and develop holistic competencies, we must ask: whose participation are we actually promoting? Has this learning opportunity be equally shared? By rethinking the relationship between mentoring, disposition and holistic competency development, this study attempts to provide some refreshing perspectives to encourage inclusive student participation in higher education.

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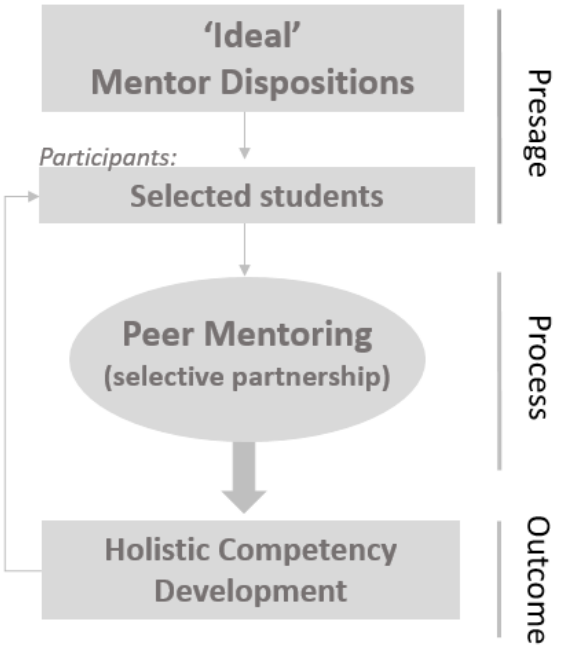

Figure 1. Model of Selective Partnership in Peer Mentoring

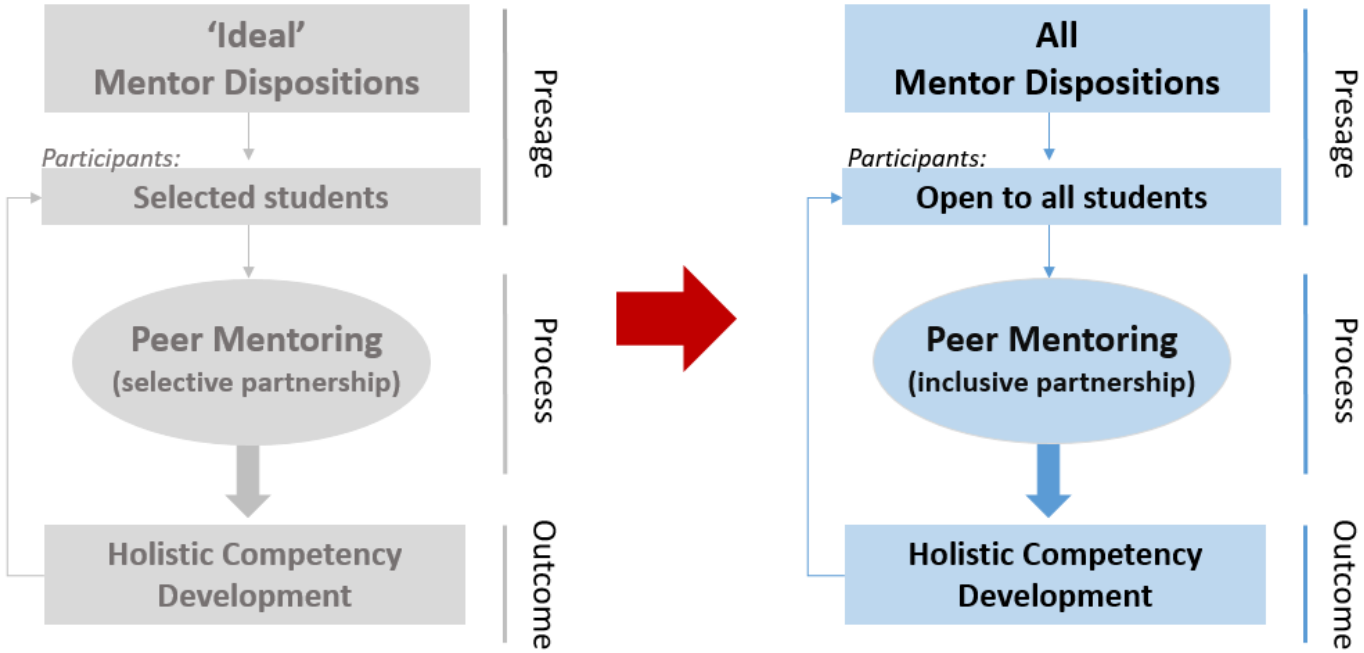

Figure 2. Model of Selective Partnership versus Inclusive Partnership

List of Dispositions	Literatures
Rich university experience/Knowledge of campus/social resources and events	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013); Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Academic achievement	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013); Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Enthusiasm/Passion/Motivation/Energy	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Communication skills	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Prior mentoring experience	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Ability and willingness to commit time	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Race and gender match	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Supportiveness	Terrion & Leonard (2007); Douglass et al., (2013)
Trustworthy	Douglass et al., (2013); Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Self-disclosure/Sharing	Terrion & Leonard (2007)
Empathy	Terrion & Leonard (2007)
Personality match with mentees	Terrion & Leonard (2007)
Flexibility	Terrion & Leonard (2007)
Leadership skills	Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Self-efficacy	Holt & Fifer (2018)

Table 1. List of 'Ideal' Peer Mentor Dispositions