

Mentoring as a springboard to acculturation of immigrant students into American schools

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Abstract

Although the ever increasing diverse immigrant and refugee students enrich and bring diversity to America's social fabric, they seem to encounter numerous challenges as they acculturate and integrate into their new school culture and environment. Although most school systems and higher education institutions have made significant efforts to facilitate this process, minimal research has documented the potential of mentoring as an alternative tool to facilitate immigrant youth acculturation into American schools. Additionally, mounting anecdotal evidence suggests that if these challenges are not addressed in a timely and appropriate manner, then the educational, health as well as the civil and governmental institutions may be forced to deal with far greater problems later in life. This article highlights findings from a case study of a pilot mentoring intervention project among diverse newcomer middle school immigrant and refugee students. It will describe the benefits, challenges as well as future recommendations. The author suggest that a culturally sensitive mentoring program has the potential to significantly enhance the acculturation and schooling of diverse at risk immigrant and refugee students entering America's school system.

Keywords: mentoring, immigrant youth, refugee youth, acculturation challenges, and multicultural youth.

Introduction

According to Active Voice (2003) and James (1997), immigrant and refugee children and youth under the age of 18 are the fastest-growing segment of the United States population. Specific statistics from the United States Bureau of Census (1998) indicate that out of the total 72.3 million youths under 18 years in the United States, 2.8 million were immigrants or foreign born. They experience critical environmental, academic, psychosocial and psychosocial barriers. Most of them are confronted by two different cultures, and are often struggling to find ways to balance the two (Bailey, 2002). They leave behind a familiar language, culture, role models, community, and a social system and are forced to adjust to totally new ways of life. For most immigrant and refugee youth, the challenge of mastering academic and language content as well as that of developing a personality can be overwhelming. Their inability to communicate ideas and feelings confidently can result in confusion, frustration, anger, and alienation. It is also evident that, because of the language and cultural limitations, they have a high probability of not receiving sufficient education and other human services to enable them to become independent, successful, and productive adults (James, 1997; Bailey, 2002). Along with the problems that hinder the acculturation, assimilation and adaptation of immigrant youth into their new environment, some are at greater risks of reenacting the collective failures and the consequent frustrations of America's past.

A closer look at these newcomers' efforts to settle, strategies for economic mobility, efforts at learning a new language and a new culture, decisions and efforts to embrace their new environment, indicate inevitable struggles (Portes & Rumbant, 1996). It is therefore evident that there is a need to create innovative intervention programs that can help immigrant and refugee youth to integrate and acculturate into the American schools. American school system, school personnel as well as teachers should make efforts to create environments that socialize and acculturate students while teaching them.

According to Ogden (2003), service-learning is a productive and effective tool for confronting the direst challenges. Thus suggesting the need for training institutions to incorporate programs (i.e. service learning, mentoring, cultural competency programs among other activities) that would prepare college graduates to serve as catalysts for creating culturally competent environments where all children can learn. It will provide students with the support needed to encourage, support, guide and motivate them to become successful and productive citizens.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will focus on literature review on the underserved immigrant and refugee youth condition. The second section will describe the service learning mentoring program. It will provide information the activities, challenges as well as accomplishments. The third and final section will give suggestions on culturally competent service learning mentoring programs.

The Underserved Immigrant and Refugee Youth Condition

Over the past decades America has continued to experience a drastic increase in numbers of multiethnic immigrant and refugee youth. According to Friedlander (1991), approximately two million school age immigrants migrated to the United States in the 1980s and over 5 million entered the United States public schools in the 1990s. Friedlander also reported that these children speak over 150 different languages and the majorities have difficulty communicating in

English. Current statistics indicate that the immigrant and refugee student population in the United States is over 30 million and has a projected growth of 3.8% per year (Friedlander 1991; & Collingwood, 1997).

Guilford County and North Carolina for example are currently more diverse than any other time in history. They are culturally and linguistically more diverse than at any other time since the early decades of this century. Specifically, Guilford County is reported to have over 50,000 immigrants and refugees and almost 50% most of these immigrants are under the age of 30 (Bailey, 2002). Statistics from Guilford County Schools indicate that there are over 3,050 students, who are from different cultures and ethnicities and speak one of 82 languages other than English. According to the chairman of the school board, immigrant students continue to increase and in the year 2002, Guilford County had 600 more students than the year 2001. A breakdown of students from one of the area schools indicated that there are over 50 different countries and 20 different languages represented.

In addition, adolescent immigrant students must balance the value systems of their native culture, ever present at home, with those of the dominant culture, which prevail at school. It has also been noted that immigrant youth regularly reject the traditions of their parents and try to adopt the practices of their new American peers. Their ability to learn English is further limited because most of them live in linguistically isolated households. It has also been pointed out that, most of them are inappropriately poor, have poor health, have high school drop out rates, are overage for their grade levels, have low rates of participation in post secondary education, are from low income families, and give more priority to work (Portes & Rumbant, 1996). According to the 1992 Census Bureau, roughly 50% of Hispanics ages 16 to 24 dropped out of high school. Thus, the increase in dropout rates among immigrant adolescent students is cause for a growing concern. Many of these changes render them vulnerable to drug use, obesity, violence, teen pregnancies, and other unhealthy lifestyles (Maat, 1997; Kaleidoscope, 2003).

It is evident that, unless adolescent immigrant youth receive appropriate intervention, they will continue to face the possibility of being undereducated, underemployed, and unprepared to participate fully in society. It is also clear that professional development and innovative programs plays a significant role in equipping schools and communities to meet the challenges facing immigrant and refugee students. According to Carmona (1996), the social setting, the teacher and the educational approaches are different in the United States, and unless schools and other agencies work together, or unless teachers and the community develop a tacit understanding of the acculturation process of their diverse students, then both the society and the adolescent immigrant may be forced to pay the costs of inadequate schooling and services.

Working with an awareness of these issues will therefore allow colleges and universities to develop and implement culturally effective programs (i.e. service learning mentoring) that can nurture immigrant and refugee students to be productive citizens.

Multicultural Youth Program

Faces around Us is a multicultural multifaceted youth program that was initiated by a community based non-profit organization in urban North Carolina. Hellison, et al (2000), personal and social responsibility model was used as a conceptual framework for the program. The program was implemented to serve the acculturation needs of diverse immigrant and refugee youth from all parts of the world (i.e. Hispanic/Latinos, Africans, Southeast Asians, and Eastern Europeans). Its main focus was to help at –risk immigrant and refugee students develop

resiliency against societal barriers and to help them experience equal success while integrating into the American culture and schools in general. This multifaceted program incorporated the following components: 1) acculturation trainings; 2) a mentoring and tutoring program incorporating community volunteers, local and university students, 3) enrichment and recreational activities in the community and on the school campuses; and 4) the engagement of parents in the academics and health of their children. The activities were offered after school (at two elementary schools and one middle school) and during other non-school hours (at a community recreation center and a local church). Although the program had few paid staff and AmeriCorps members, most of the culturally diverse student mentors were recruited from neighboring universities and colleges. The overall goal of the program was to ensure that the targeted immigrant and refugee children acculturated well into their new American environment. The specific aims of the “Faces around Us” Initiative were as follows:

- 1) To enhance the acculturation process of the diverse immigrant and refugee youth;
- 2) To provide a road map of resources to the youth and their families
- 3) To provide support, mentoring as well as safe recreational opportunities during non school hours.

College and University Mentors

Program staff and volunteers recruited mentors from the local community college and private and public colleges and universities to serve as mentors. Students were required to provide a background check and prove of enrolment in school during the semester. These students were expected to develop a sustained relationship between themselves and the target children (that includes support, guidance, and assistance that will enhance the child’s academic success). Specifically, they were expected to spend time with the child engaged in such activities as tutoring, assisting with homework and engaging in enrichment and/or recreational activities such as participating in community recreational exercise and sports activities. Four strategies were implemented to ensure that children were matched with appropriate mentors. First, a screening process was implemented to ensure the safety of all children, including a check to ensure that mentors do not have criminal records involving inappropriate behavior with children. The screening process also helped to ensure that mentors were willing to make a long-term commitment to the program and to match mentors and children based on shared interests and talents. Second, the program provided all college mentors with cultural competency training activities to enhance their understanding of the needs of the diverse immigrant and refugee children. The mentors were also required to participate in an interpreter training. Third, the program had written policies regarding the number of children each mentor could serve, the type of services that they will be expected to offer and the minimum number of hours expected. Finally, the program provided the mentors with ongoing support, from professional staff or through mentor support groups. These ongoing support helped mentors to continue to invest in their relationships with youth and other stakeholders so that these relationships could survive and thrive.

Program Activities

The student mentors provided programs and activities that nurtured, promoted and embraced diversity, healthy lifestyles and academic success for all the program participants. They provided the following: tutoring, help with homework, provided information and on health and wellness, served healthy snack, acculturation tips and facilitated physical activity sessions. The activities were designed to help the youth with their academics and to help socializing the youth to experience, believe and to understand their strengths and their potentialities.

The content of the program was centered on the following five levels of the responsibility model: Self Control, Effort and participation, self-direction, Helping others and taking it outside the program (applying all the above levels outside the program).

Typical Day at the Program

- 3.00 -4.00PM: Homework and tutoring
- 4.00- 4:15: Snack (Serve healthy snack and discussions on healthy diet)
- 4: 15- 5: 00: physical activity and reflections (sport or dance)
- 5:00-5:30: Reflections and departure

Outcome Evaluation

The goal of the outcome evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the program in enhancing the acculturation and the academic performance. Focus groups, interviews and daily journals reflections were used to collected data on the effectiveness of the program. Students (those being served and those who were serving were each given an opportunity to reflect on the activities and their roles. They evaluated their activities individually and in groups. These were conducted with the help of interpreters and translators. The data collected was triangulated and analyzed and summarized as indicated below.

Voices of the Immigrant and Refugee students: Their perceived Benefits(Table1.1)

Data contained in table 1.1, indicated that most of the students perceived the program to be very beneficial. They specifically indicated that the program helped them to: improve their overall grades, understand the American culture, read and speak better English, understand the differences between healthy and unhealthy food, learn how to play different Western/American sports. Regarding their relationship with the service learning students all students enjoyed having them around. When asked to comment on her experience, Maria had this to say:“Having the university students come to my school to help me with homework was the greatest thing that I have experienced in America so far”. She noted that the students were very friendly, helpful and always available even when they called them after the program.

Voices of the University Students: Their perceived Benefits (Table1.2)

As Lay (2000), suggested service learning provides an opportunity for students to learn as well as provide effective and ethical contributions to their communities and workplaces. This service learning gave the mainstream American students an opportunity to learn more about other cultures. They gained real world experience about other cultures from the immigrant and refugee youth. Though some of the students struggled with language and culture, they indicated

that they would like to continue working with diverse youth. The students acknowledge that their services were for a good cause. Most of them indicated that they had no idea “what to expect from students who are different”. But after the entire semester of service learning mentoring, they acknowledged the fact that the opportunity to mentor the diverse immigrant and refugee children was extremely beneficial. To some, the rare opportunity helped to enhance their ability to work with students from diverse cultures, and to others it gave them another perspective of looking at life. They learned to appreciate what they have and they had an idea of “what new comer students encounter in a new culture and environment”. They therefore indicated that they felt better prepared to work with people of other cultures. It helped them develop dispositions that enhance their teaching. Overall the students reported that the service learning opportunity compliment the course material on diversity.

Tips and Suggestions for Future Programs

To ease the challenges of acculturation and schooling, I believe that colleges and universities should incorporate culturally sensitive service learning mentoring opportunities. The students suggested that colleges and universities should:

1. Establish and enhance service-learning and mentoring programs in partnership with the diverse communities and organizations.
2. Develop activities and programs that embrace and respect the cultural and linguistic values and preferences of each diverse individual student
3. Educate faculty and students on the cultures and values of people who are different (I.e. time concept, roles and appropriate communication skills among others)
4. Create programs and activities that focus on the strengths (I.e. talents and skills) and weaknesses of the diverse students
5. Involve all the stakeholders i.e. parents, community leaders and religious leaders
6. Create culturally sensitive programs that enable each stakeholder to be responsible, productive and empowered.
7. Recognize and reward both the efforts of both those who are serving as well as those being for served
8. Utilize translators and interpreters as needed.
9. Incorporate activities and programs that appreciate differences (i.e. cultural festivities, food samples etc)
10. Provide more field experience, service learning and internship opportunities across the years of study and not just during the final years of the college tenure.

Table 1.1

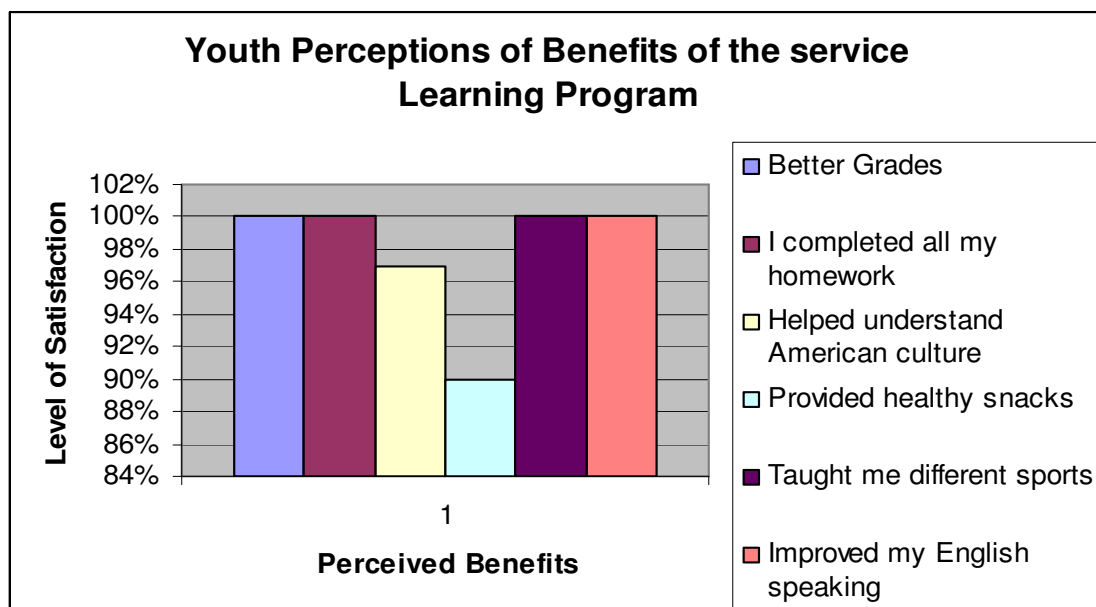
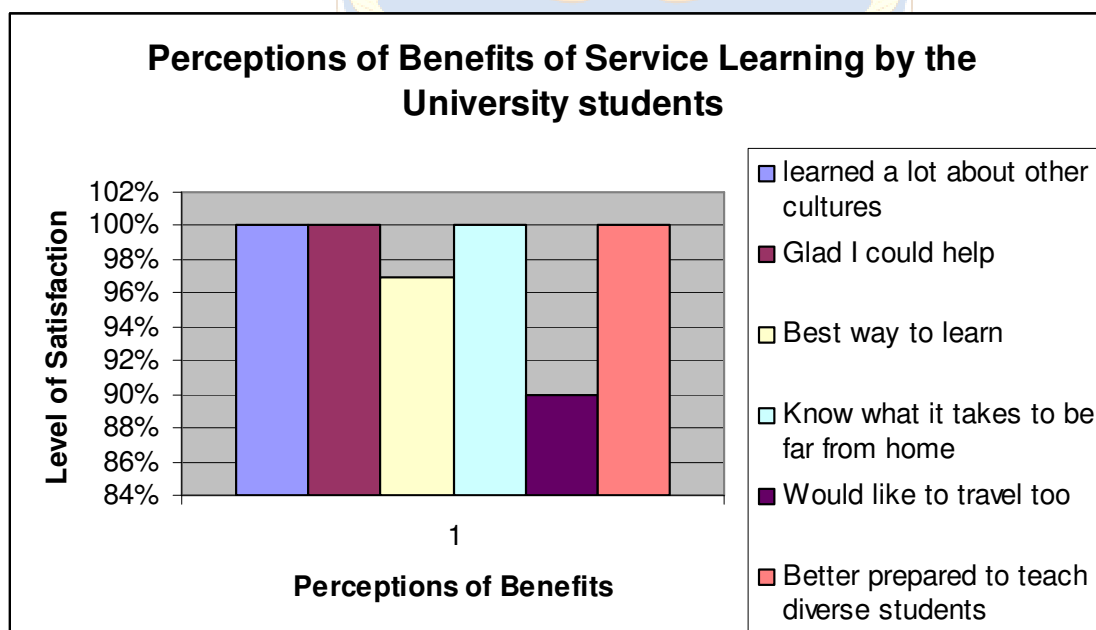


Table 1.2



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