Beyond Matchmaking: Peer Mentor Role and Leadership Development in a Student Mentorship Program
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The mentorship programme in the school of education of a South African university shows what is possible in peer mentor leadership development. Through the analysis of first-year student mentees’ perceptions, experiences, and assessment of their peer mentors’ roles, and accounts of the mentors’ review of their role in the mentorship programme, this paper examines ways the peer mentor role opens spaces for enacting leadership and indirectly scaffolding leadership development. The study used a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data was collected using semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, and document analysis. The data was analysed applying the theoretical lens of implicit leadership theory. Three categories of findings were made: first, both mentees and mentors see the role of the peer mentor as primarily involving leadership, which is important to mentoring outcomes. Second, the peer mentors understand their role as including the activities of a leader, which entails opportunity for leadership development. Third, peer mentees and mentors are not ignorant of their needs. They make sense of these needs while characterizing their expectations as mentee and mentor in the mentoring relationship. These findings reveal that though non-systemic issues in academic development practices in this context detract mentoring outcomes, peer mentoring fosters leadership development of the student peer mentors.

Introduction and Background
In South Africa, access and participation in higher education post-1994 continue to widen to include students from historically disadvantaged populations. Widening student participation and the expectations that come with it also bring certain tensions in the higher education. One of such tensions is that a majority of universities in South Africa are torn between the external pressure to attain higher global university rankings and internal pressure of increasing demand by students for quality teaching and learning experiences. In their recent call for ‘decolonization’ of higher education, the students show dissatisfaction with the quality of their experiences in the universities. However, pockets of good works are happening in the universities to improve the quality of learning and support services for students. The problem is that most of the work is done in silos and as short-term projects that are often unreported or under-reported. This paper is an attempt to look inwards to draw on one of such excellent work in student peer mentoring support. It begins with an exploration of first-year transition adjustment in university and peer mentoring support. It examines the historical construct of educational disadvantage in the context of South African university system; its influences on conceptions of academic development and mentoring support for first-year students. It then goes on to discuss the peer mentoring program in the school of education. The aim, theoretical framework, methodology and findings will be discussed, and will conclude with implications of the findings for academic development practices in South African universities.

First-year transitional adjustment in university and peer mentoring support.
The first-year experience is a particularly challenging period for new students because of the difficulties of adjustment to studies and life on campus (van Zyl et al., 2017; McLoughlin, 2012). The first-year student’s transition from family support and home to the different context and culture of a university may lead to experiences of stress, disengagement, less campus involvement, culture shock, withdrawal (Booker & Brevard, 2017; Julia & Veni, 2012; Guiffrida, 2005), and difficulties in social relations (McLoughlin, 2012). Besides stress reactions, other factors such as language barriers, academic challenges, financial problems, and what has been referred to as ‘fear of the unknown’ (Wangeri et al., 2012) are other identified influences on students’ experiences and adjustment in university (Mwangi, 2017; Boughey & McKenna, 2016). Driscoll (2011) observes that adjustment challenges may be group-related or occur at the individual level, and can have influence on the students’ behavioural, cognitive, and attitudinal functioning.

Studies that examined factors that mitigate first-year students’ adjustment stress in university highlight the significance of social support (Mutambara & Veni, 2012), which is especially true for socially and educationally disadvantaged students. Specifically, peer mentoring support is linked to the better adjustment experiences among first-year students that have particularly challenging transition in university (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Guiffrida, 2005). Thus, one can argue that first-year students can be peer mentored for successful university life and study despite their level of pre-university preparations in schools.

An overview of conception of academic development and mentoring support for first-year students in South African universities.
In South Africa, the transition literature suggests that the challenges and adjustment difficulties that first-year students’ face in universities are extremely complex and systemic (van Zyl, 2017). The transitional challenges and adjustment difficulties of first-year students can influence their engagement of support services and result in negative impact on their studies. However, the majority of first-year students—those coming from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas in South Africa, far from being strangers in a different ‘world’ of the university (Samson, 2017)—are rather in need of appropriate and context-relevant support in the form of peer mentoring.

However, first-year student engagement in peer mentoring is marked by challenges due to a number of factors. Perhaps, the most significant factor is the negative constructs of mentoring as an appendage of the previous practices of academic development in the universities. These practices tended to isolate disadvantaged students as a group with inadequate educational experience (Samson, 2017). Thus, the first-year student mentees that participate in peer mentoring are stigmatized with the historical connotations of disadvantage. This results in the mentees’ negative attitude towards seeking help, which is also observed among students who perceive that they are at a disadvantage relative to their peers (Talebi, Matheson, & Anisman, 2013). While mentees’ lethargy to seek support may seem preposterous, it underscores the importance of re-strategizing the way peer mentor support is conceptualized and practiced in the school.

Peer Mentoring, the School of Education of a South African University context.
The first-year students’ mentoring practice is student-driven in conception and uses a mentor-mentee match making process that puts decision making in the hands of the mentee. However, the researcher observed first-year student mentees as lethargic and inactive in their participation. They tend to expect guidance and want their mentors to enact leadership and show the way. In response to these role expectations of the mentees, the mentoring led to other benefits for the peer mentors, which are beyond the aim of scaffolding first-year student mentees’ adjustment. However, while few works suggest evidence of benefit to the student peer mentor as an outcome of mentoring (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012), a repertoire of research on this subject is lacking in the literature.

The Aim of the Current Paper.
The paper aims to report on analysis of expectations of mentor role in the mentoring relationship of first-year student mentees and their peer mentors, and the implications for academic development practices. The research question that the study sought to answer is: What do first-year student mentees and mentors in a school of education of a South African university see as the core role of peer mentor?

The paper argues that there is need to go further than match making student mentee and peer mentor. It is important to understand what the core role of the peer mentor is seen to be in a student peer mentoring relationship in order to maximize the outcomes. Furthermore, the student mentee and peer mentor expectations that leadership is an implicit and important peer mentor role, influence how both invest in the mentoring relationship that results in mentor leadership development as an outcome.

Theoretical Framework
In the context of this present study, mentors and mentees are matched, using the learning library concept to support mentees’ navigation beyond the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Simons, Young, & Gibson, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987) in minimal time. The objective was to focus on decreasing dependency and increasing self-reliance (Zachary, 2000). However, what was overlooked is the expectations of the mentees that their mentors’ role has to include taking the lead to deal with particular experiences of pedagogical and socio-structural barriers. Yet, the mentors do unwittingly accept this leadership responsibility in their mentoring relationships with mentees.

Social interactions, like a mentoring relationship, provide the context of learning and leadership development (Middlebrooks & Haberkorn, 2009; Simons, Young, & Gibson, 2000). Leadership researchers have sought to theorize how leaders develop their capability (McCauley & Velsor, 2004). Middlebrooks and Haberkorn (2009) suggest that mentors draw on their talent and experience while assuming an implicit role as leaders. Thus, Beltman and Schaeben (2012) and Middlebrooks and Haberkorn (2009) affirm other benefits to mentoring for the mentor in addition to mentees’ development. Implicit leadership development happens in the mentoring due to the nature of mentor-mentee relationship; the mentor-mentee expectations and mentors’ activities in response, and the influences the mentors exert that are seen to be implicit in their role (Middlebrooks & Haberkorn, 2009).

Methodology
This study, conducted in the second semester of 2017 for a period of 13 weeks, used a qualitative approach and a case study design (Creswell, 2013). The site of the study is a school of education with student population predominantly from historically
excluded and disadvantaged groups: 26 participants, comprised of 20 first-year student mentees and six peer mentors for first-year students are selected using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). Individual semi-structured interviews (Turner, 2010), focus groups, observation and documentation analysis of mentors’ monthly report are used to collect the data. Four mentee focus groups, and a focus group for the six mentors are created. One mentee per focus group, and two mentors are selected for individual interviews. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the data, which is triangulated at data level (Creswell, 2013) to develop the themes for discussion. Voluntary consent is obtained from all participants in the research and their anonymity is maintained by use of pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013).

Findings and Discussion
The peer mentor and mentees’ every day mentoring activities involved the peer mentor in leadership roles that influenced the outcomes as described in the themes discussed below.

The Star.
The observations reveal that, at first impression, the first-year students in the school generally seem nonchalant in their attitude to accessing learning support that are being provided for them, but in contrast, show much enthusiasm in attending their lectures. In all focus group discussions with mentee participants, there is a common agreement that they are cautious of taking initial steps by themselves.

Subo: Yes, it is not all mentors that insist and make sure you are fine, like try to find what is stopping you from consulting the lecturer, like clear the air and let mentee know this is how it works. You know, some of us are not from ex-model C schools (well-resourced schools in this context), we are used to the teacher finding out the issues and sorting things out, but here in uni,(university) you are left on your own, you’re like, you never know...

In the individual interview, almost all mentee participants interviewed separately confirmed that they found their assertiveness and agency in taking active responsibility to do things for themselves only after their mentor had initiated the first steps.

Nombuso: ...because my mentor said to us, if you want to pass very well, attend all workshops and lectures, and do not miss to consult the lecturers when you need to. She is like, ‘guys there’s no other way’...

Precious: I’m like, not sure of what to do myself, but then when the mentor like, asked where are we with our AL (Academic Literacy) assignment, I’m like, I don’t even understand what is expected, so when I spoke out, he said: have you consulted with the lecturer? And he took me to the AL lecturer’s office... and that’s how I started... I wouldn’t have been this wiser if not for my mentor... he is the star.

A notable quality of a leader is the ability to effect change in a positive direction. The perceived role of peer mentor as influencing the mentees to attend lecturers’ consultation is inferred as leadership. On the other hand, though first-year student mentees’ inertia to seek support can be attributed to the transitional challenges, the mentee show the willingness to follow steps if initiated by their mentors. This suggests an implied leader – follower dynamics in the mentoring relationship. The gap created by lack of familial support and absence of the teacher to help them find out the issues and sort things out, as is the case in high school, means that during this period, first-year mentees’ expectation from peer mentors is that of temporarily filling in the gap of the teacher figure in this regard. The mentees’ self-denial of their need for consultations and other support that avail them, as the narrative suggests, indicate certain self-doubt in their own ability. The inability of the mentees to make crucial decisions or initiate the positive change they desire to see on their own, is a setback that possibly results from, as Wangeri et al. (2012) puts it, their ‘fear of the unknown.’ Perhaps, the ‘fear of the unknown’ proves to be the critical threshold the first-year mentees have to cross with the peer mentor leadership in their transitional trajectory.

In the focus group discussion sessions with the mentor participants I asked them the question; what do they consider as the important influence of their role on mentees’ acceptance of responsibility for accessing support... The mentors indicated the importance of anticipating the mentees’ need. They assert that through the use of cues, and being constantly updated on current mentees’ issues they are able to meet their mentees half-way, and together find solutions to what might be their mentees’ problems. Mentors see from mentees’ inactions and or reactions what their pressing expectations are, and prompt positive actions using cues.

Lihle: The mentees want their mentor to be there for them and, I am keeping this in mind always. And, even off-mentoring hours, when they chat me or SMS, I do respond immediately, because I know, it’s already a big gesture from mentee to ask, and my response can trigger them to do more... and take responsibility.

Maintaining positive attitude towards the mentoring and being non-judgemental are seen as effective strategies to successful mentoring by the mentors. The mentor’s ability to use these strategies with mentees in the mentoring relationship shows
they are developing competences in achieving set goals drawing on the positive values or strengths the mentees bring to the mentoring relationship while doing so. Studies affirm that besides strategic and technical competencies, social competencies and character are among important leadership competencies (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). The relationships between the mentors’ conceptualizations of their role, implied in the strategies they adopt to target the mentoring goals, and the mentees’ expectations from mentors, as suggested above in the mentees’ narratives, highlights the qualities of empathy and persistent commitment to set objectives that the mentors demonstrate to their mentees. These are qualities both the mentors and the mentees expressed as desirable mentor abilities. “The Star” mentor is seen as having the usefulness to apply social competencies and character to the role; understanding the mentees, showing resilience, and persevering with active response to the mentees’ concerns. These qualities are implied in the leadership, which the mentors enact through their action (Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

**Firm footprints.**

In the focus group discussion with mentors, they are asked whether they consider their role as leadership. The mentors' reflection on their role as leadership suggests ambivalence. Yet, they positioned themselves impliedly as leaders by the way they perceive and describe their activities as mentors.

Lihle: I am not very sure I would say I’m a leader, but I know my mentees expect a lot, of [from] me, perhaps they see me as one [a leader]. But when you say leader, it means like the SRC [student representative council] being the voice for the students, but as a mentor, I don’t speak for my mentees, they have their say. Am kind of like, listen to them, see what has to be done, and supporting them with what must be done, like I’m firm footprints for my mentees to take them in the right direction.

Sifo: Yes, in some ways I would say that I play the role of a leader here. You need to understand what the mentees want from you, you try to reach out to them, like listen to what they say in their conversations through the WhatsApp chat group... so you can find out what needs to be done to get such concerns out of the way of their studies. I think being there for mentees means I must have to take key responsibility...

Mentors describe their role as demanding the use of cognitive and emotive competencies in understanding their mentees’ needs; anticipating the mentees’ expectations and what they see as important.

Twala: When I started as a mentor in 2016, I soon realized that my first-year mentees are not attending mentoring sessions as I would like. I made a number of moves to encourage their attendance, but I also decided to do something outside the usual communications to get them to attend. I extended membership request to them to sports union aerobic and gym clubs...both opportunity to get closer to a number of them to talk about things, and issues of mentoring like their lectures, campus life, what are their concerns, and their plans for their studies... paved the way to getting to know them, and regular and improved attendance at mentoring sessions. Other mentees... communicated the message that the mentor (meaning myself) is a ‘cool’ guy (meaning caring, understanding, and responsive to mentees’ concerns) started attending... I think every mentee would like their mentor to be influential in a caring way. Yeah maybe, kind of a leader of some sort...

Twala’s narrative indicate the mentors’ ability to be constructively responsive to their mentees. The mentors change the ways they respond and try to reach out to the mentees they are supporting, and perceive what they do as being influential. Their being influential is an effective leadership skill the mentors’ apply to their role, which does not go unnoticed by the mentees themselves. The importance of the leader’s capability of self-introspection and vision, and the conscious awareness of context in carrying out the leadership role cannot be overemphasized. Leaders have to influence their development and development of those around them. Getting to know the mentees implies being an understanding, caring and responsive mentor, which the mentees articulate as being ‘cool.’ Given that the mentor is able to connect to their levels and reality, mentees become enlivened, and willing to interact and engage the mentoring activities. This is a gesture that is necessary on the part of both mentee and mentor, without which assessing and identifying exactly what mentoring support needs the mentee has would be difficult from a distance. One of the core considerations in leadership development is the leader’s ability to assess the needs that have to be met to reach set objectives (Northhouse, 2018). In using effective strategies to bring mentees to commit to the mentoring and thereby position themselves to be able to assess and respond to the mentees’ needs, mentors characterize their routine role in the mentoring relationship in leadership.

**Conclusion**

In their activities, the peer mentors engage and assist disadvantaged first-year mentees and scaffold their learning and successful adjustment in university. At the same time, they draw on real-life strategies and experiences in influencing change that makes a difference for these mentees. Mentoring is seen as a practice that provides the context for individuals’ conceptualization of leadership and themselves as leaders (Simons, Young, & Gibson, 2000; Middlebrooks & Haberkorn,
2009), which makes it a useful space for enacting leadership. Bennis and Thomas (2002) contend that the crucible of leadership is in the experiencing of leadership in action. The context and practice of peer mentoring, as the findings in this study indicate, provide the peer mentors the opportunity of experiencing leadership in action, even if inadvertently. Research interest on leadership development centres on examining leaders ability to make cognitive sense of whom they are, what they are capable of, and how. The findings of this study suggest that, while working on achieving certain outcome, which is improving mentee benefits, mentors make cognitive sense of their role. This role entails development of their capacity for peer leadership. It is a significant outcome that the mentoring activities instigate the nurturing of the mentor as a leader, whilst scaffolding learning for the mentee.

The implication of these findings for academic development practices and policy in South African universities is the need to rethink the framing of the first-year student and the peer mentoring support. However, systemic and unshifting discourse of disadvantage in the universities have the effect of producing and reinforcing structural barriers to the student learning by incentivizing disadvantage and side-lining the students’ own account of their experiences of learning. Yet, alongside weaknesses, the students do bring strengths and character to the learning spaces. The student mentees and peer mentors understand their positions and are cognitively aware of their needs, expectations and strengths. This must be acknowledged, valued, and seen as useful resource-rich insight to inform the design and implementation of student peer mentoring programs that work. At a time that the students are demanding for a university system and experiences that do not alienate them, academic development practices need to be underpinned by evidence from practice and relevant research.

References