Beyond the romance: the promise and pitfalls of refugee mentoring programs

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Context

• Concerns about refugee integration and social cohesion (Cantle, 2012)

• Evidence of ambivalence towards asylum seekers (Essential Poll, 2016) and people of Muslim faith (Markus, 2016)

• First class settlement services but a gap in contact between refugees and local communities (Fodzar & Hartley, 2013, Westoby, 2009)
What is refugee mentoring?

Relationship
“..enables inter-cultural relationships that are otherwise unlikely to develop or progress in such intricate ways” (Askins, 2016, p. 525)

Refugees linked with trained volunteer members of local community to:
• assist settlement and integration
• enable cross-cultural learning
• develop reciprocal relationships (Askins, 2014; Esterhuizen & Murphy, 2007).

70 links per year requires one to two staff
My Research Question

How might the receiving community and refugees form relationships through refugee mentoring to welcome and assist integration of refugees?
My approach

Study of refugee mentoring programs in Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane:
• investigates how refugee mentoring assists or hinders relationships

• explores concepts of hospitality, intercultural encounter, reciprocity and gratitude

• ethnography, observation, interviews with mentors and refugee mentees, mentor survey & interviews with 4 program co-ordinators

• everyday multiculturalism approach privileges experiences of ordinary people (Wise & Velayuthum, 2009, Neal and Vincent, 2013)
Legacy of Aylan Kurdi
Sydney Vigil 2015
Everyday learning

Food: Cheese or butter?  
Using a stove  
Time  
Catching trains and buses  
Using a lift or escalator  
Manners  
Australian English  
Shaking hands  
Dealing with professionals  
Junk mail and real mail  

Dress  
Classroom participation  
Gender relations  
Dating  
Eye contact  
Renting  
Garbage  
Cleanliness  
Can you find us a cow?
Everyday challenges

Jamal
We don’t know which one is sugar, which one is flour and you know which one is milk.

Asha
Before I get to know the number of the bus I used to cry and people come and help me and they were very extremely kind to me. Sometime I forget….I’m illiterate, completely illiterate.
Cracks

....sometimes when she was arranging a time to visit us, we didn’t exactly realise what the time was, so she came and we were not home and she got really upset. We couldn’t sometimes get what she was saying in terms of setting appointments. When that happened, she never called us back again (mentee)

This person is so busy, so why would they put their hand up for a mentoring program if they don’t have sufficient time? (mentee)

I don’t know the name of my mentor (mentee)

It’s not all unicorns and rainbows (mentor)
Reciprocity and power relations

What are the underpinning values?

• Boundaries

• Rules e.g. mentee not allowed to visit mentor home or have mobile number

• Mentor reporting on visits

• Co-ordinator or mentor choosing the mentee

• Enabling voice of refugee in program
Hospitality
Benefits of having a mentor

• When the bond is strong, relationship can be transformative

• Someone to “count on”

• Mentor as role model and possibility of future self

• “Emotional citizenry” (Askins, 2017) and sense of belonging
Benefits of being a mentor

• Giving back

• Inter-cultural awareness

• Friendship

• Work experience

• Political action: mentoring as a “small act of defiance” (Bellemore, 2017)
Refugee Mentoring Relationship Typology (Bellemore, 2017)

- **Fragile**
  - No relationship
  - One or both parties withdraw
  - Drop out with no notice
  - No connection
  - "Compulsory"

- **Me-Mentoring**
  - Self-interest
  - Busyness
  - Hidden agendas
  - Lack of insight

- **Colonising**
  - Directive
  - Wants to be thanked
  - Knows best
  - Power imbalance
  - Entitled

- **Defined**
  - Boundaries
  - Specific tasks e.g. English language
  - Dependable
  - Predictable

- **Immersive**
  - Enduring
  - Secure bond
  - Friendship / Kin
  - Reciprocity
  - Loyal
  - Respect
  - Trust
  - Gratitude
  - Ontological security
Seven take home messages

1. Enable mentee voice
2. Don’t over-manage risk
3. Expect misunderstanding
4. Evaluate
5. Screen and train
6. Six-month commitment and local match
7. Establish reference group and debriefs
References