

A Change in Interpersonal Relational Capital: Through mentoring relationships and homework activities in a university setting

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an innovative project revolving around student participation in homework activities. The theoretical framework is relational pedagogy with a focus on student-mentor relationships in a university setting. The authors used semi-structured interviews combined with observations of the interactions between the participants. The findings are analysed at a micro- and meso-level, based on an interpersonal relational perspective on teaching, Pedagogical Relational Teachership (PeRT). The popular claim that homework time is positively related to scholastic achievements gains was observed. The findings from this study add to the general knowledge of how participants perceive their school activities and future careers. Furthermore, relational values like *connecting, belonging, trusting, including and confidence-building* emerged between students and mentors over time. The examination of the mentor-student relationships highlights how a new *interpersonal relational capital* launched a movement with a possible change in social position, in terms of entering future university studies. The article discusses the results at a societal level in relation to equity and young people's possibilities of participating in future university studies. Since the study shows the positive aspects of 'enriching' activities supporting immigrant youth in homework activities at university facilities, we encourage other institutions of higher education to open up their premises for similar projects, in order to improve engagement, raise achievement levels and enhance inclusiveness in the larger social fabric.

Keywords: homework; mentor-student relationship; trust; interpersonal relational capital; equity; inclusion

INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a larger project aiming to explore the impact of ‘enriching’ activities, such as community development that supports immigrant youth in school-work (homework) in order to enhance engagement, raise achievement levels and create interest in future university studies. The goal of the homework project is to show how collective engagement, represented by measures of informal social controls, mobilisation of residents/families, sustainable community development, social cohesion and trust can help buffer communities counteract the negative effects of being isolated from attending higher education. Based on an interpersonal relational view of teaching and education (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010; Aspelin, 2014; Ljungblad, 2019), the specific objectives and goals of this study are to find out why the students participate in homework activities, and what is their reasoning concerning the mentoring experiences offered at a university setting in the evenings. Hopefully, the findings from this study will add to the general knowledge of how mentor-student relationships can support young people’s future careers and opportunities.

As a consequence of the recent massive immigration in Sweden, the education system has lately come under serious pressure. This rapid demographic change has brought with it ethnic segregation and inequality, which presents a major challenge for policymakers in terms of social integration and educational inclusion (OECD, 2016). The challenges inclusive education faces, such as issues of equity in education in general and immigrant integration more specifically, are varied and complex. Sweden’s cultural and political heritage could have been an ideal setting to fully implement inclusive education as envisioned in *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 1994). However, the new political movements and policies that dominate the Swedish education system have created contradictory and conflicting realities, which not only work against fundamental equity issues but also against the Swedish traditions of universalism, comprehensiveness and egalitarianism. The challenge on a national level is to address these changes while continuing to guarantee equivalence in the education system. However, the meanings of core concepts can shift across time and context. For instance, the concept of equivalence has been linked with freedom of choice and education as a civil right (the rights of students/parents). This contrasts with the tradition of uniformity, which has been more closely associated with the idea of education as a social right (Englund, 2005; Beach & Dyson, 2016; Pihl et al., 2018).

Marginalisation and segregation of socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups have increased. Result and resource differences have widened among municipalities, schools and students (Berhanu, 2016; Beach & Dyson, 2016; UNICEF, 2018). Swedish efforts in the past to promote equity through a variety of educational policies have been fascinating. Early educational policies, including the macro-political agenda, focused on the social welfare model, have helped to diminish the effects of differential social, cultural and economic background on outcomes. This has lately come under threat (Skolverket, 2015). Researchers emphasise that a ‘spatial mismatch’ between increasingly suburban job opportunities and the minority residents of poor urban neighbourhoods has magnified the new challenges (Bauer et al., 2005; Lange, 2008). This combination of barriers creates communities subject to serious crime, health issues and educational problems that, in turn, further restrict the opportunities of those growing up and living in them. One approach to tackle the problem, as we envisage it here, is community-based activities, such as homework support and mentoring offered to students in disadvantaged situations (Kerr et al., 2014).

This specific study deals with homework activities for high school students from one of Gothenburg’s suburbs. The project was started by one of the authors and, after running for a couple of years, we received reports from participating schools that students have developed aspirations as manifested in their school performance. This has raised a profound eagerness to deepen our understanding of the mentor-student relationships to support cross-cultural efforts (Freeman & Kochan, 2018). The aim of this study is to explore the interpersonal relational aspects transpiring between participating students and mentors.

The research questions are:

- 1. Why do students and mentors actively choose to attend homework activities?**
- 2. What relational values emerge between the participants involved in the activities?**

The study aims to provide increased relational understanding and knowledge of the interpersonal relationships that develop during homework support activities created for high school students at a university setting. The study also discusses how young people’s social capital (Woolcock, 2001) can be understood in order to explore possibilities and obstacles for the students’ future university studies.

HOMEWORK ACTIVITIES IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

The project is volunteer work with students from schools in a suburb of Gothenburg. This homework activity presents an innovative approach and is unusual in Sweden since it is situated on the university premises. The students come to the Pedagogen, University of Gothenburg every Thursday from 17:00 to 19:30. The activities began five years ago with the first group. Now we have started homework support for the sixth time with new students. We provide mentoring that stimulates and inspires students to aim higher in their studies. We want to give them the feeling that they are able to continue with high school and college. We try to demystify the university as an institution and help students focus on schoolwork—despite different backgrounds. Since the situation in some areas of Gothenburg has undergone a major change in recent years in relation to school achievements, the aim is to support the students in their schoolwork and identity formation. Sweden is not a closed society and can thereby provide many alternative opportunities. We want to help change the social climate and show young people that a variety of future opportunities exists.

This particular homework activity is an innovative approach since the mentoring process takes place solely within the university setting. Students visit the university once a week and receive mentoring support in math, natural sciences and languages from mentors (volunteers), who are prospective teachers, former teachers, retired professors, and anyone with teaching skills. Among the participating students, tens of languages are spoken. The number of participants varies but the mentors can generally expect 35 students. Most of the participants in this project come from a low socioeconomic class, and have generally settled into impoverished or immigrant concentrated urban neighbourhoods (suburbs¹) characterised by unemployment, some violence, segregation and structural barriers. Such neighbourhoods offer suboptimal schooling to their residents; schools there are typically under-resourced with a high teacher and principal turnover. Thus, mentoring offered by the homework activities for this population should be designed and structured so that it becomes an opportunity to develop academic Swedish skills while reinforcing content knowledge. In this project, there is some encouraging evidence that many of the young people from the area have benefited significantly from the homework activities. The two authors of this article have participated in the homework activities for some time. After a while, the authors deve-

loped an interest in exploring an interpersonal understanding concerning the participation of students and mentors, in the specific context of the downtown university setting. By highlighting relational values of importance for young people (Gergen, 2009), we offer an alternative relational perspective on school, to discuss society and the future of young people.

ETHNIC MINORITIES AND SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

The geographical concentration of immigrants is a frequent source of public concern. Spatial segregation is thought to delay the proper integration of immigrants (Suárez et al., 2016). Educationally, the concentration of immigrants and ethnic minorities in schools is believed to damage the school performance of both the children of immigrant and autochthonous families. As a result, host families in societies receiving immigrants are concerned about the concentration of immigrants in certain parts of the school map and try to avoid stigmatised schools, which in turn increases the over-representation of immigrants (Szulkin & Jonsson, 2007; Cebolla-Boado & Garrido-Medina, 2011; Reichenberg & Berhanu, 2017).

Students subjected to a higher immigrant concentration in primary school more often attend lower tracks and have higher dropout probabilities in secondary school. Higher immigrant concentration in secondary schools also increases the likelihood of dropping out. Previous studies seem to have underestimated this effect². A large body of current research supports the conclusion that enrichment programs, adequate training, contextual matters, mediation and the way social environments are structured could make substantial differences in acquisition and retention of knowledge and proficiencies (Berhanu, 2001; Cooper et al., 2006; Kerr et al., 2014; Suárez et al., 2016). Currently much more optimism prevails regarding human development, in particular, pertaining to enhancing young people's aspirations for a successful future.

Many researchers emphasise that a 'spatial mismatch' between increasingly suburban job opportunities and the minority residents of poor urban neighbourhoods has magnified other challenges, such as crime, the movement of middle-class residents to better neighbourhoods (in-

¹ In Swedish 'förorten', a place on the outskirts of the city.

² (Personal communication, <mailto:Carla.Haelermans@maastrichtuniversity.nl> 2018). The effects of immigrant student concentration on educational outcomes of native and immigrant students, Carla Haelermans (TIER, Top Institute for Evidence Based Education Research, Maastricht University) and Marieke Heers (FORS, Swiss Expertise Centre for the Social Sciences, University of Lausanne).

ding the phenomenon of ‘white flights’) and a perpetual shortage of capital, stores, employment opportunities and institutional resources, including persistently lower performance in school (Grönqvist, 2006; Szulkin & Jonsson, 2007). Immigrants and their children often live, at least temporarily, in neighbourhoods that have high concentrations of fellow immigrants. Typically, these neighbourhoods also have high poverty levels and are located near concentrations of the native-born poor. The conventional wisdom is that living in poor neighbourhoods leads to ‘concentration effects’ that exacerbate the problems of poverty and limit economic opportunity (Wilson, 1987; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017). Such neighbourhoods may provide adolescents with less knowledge about the education system (Ainsworth, 2002; Noam et al., 2002; Suárez et al., 2016). The analysis in this study shows how even a minimum effort in the form of homework support and extracurricular activities can alleviate the problem. Overall, the study highlights the relevance of mentoring (Marciano et al., 2019) and homework involvement in academic achievement among immigrant students.

HOMEWORK AND TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

There is ample evidence suggesting that homework has positive effects on school performance (Bang et al., 2009). Previous studies have demonstrated that students who do their homework generally attain higher class grades and achievement test scores than their peers who do not (Cooper et al., 2006). Most of the literature, reviewed for this specific purpose, suggests that immigrants living in ethnically concentrated neighbourhoods are more likely to lack the social capital that would allow them to succeed in the education system. In worse cases, they might have higher rates of negative social capital, actually working against their development (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Bang et al., 2009; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017). Schools seldom support the building of newcomers’ social capital as ‘a critical part of their transition to a new country and system’ (Hos et al., 2019, p. 101). Therefore, one of the purposes of the homework project at the university is to understand this phenomenon at close range, where the spotlight is aimed at the interpersonal relationships between participating students and volunteers, in order to explore if the students might develop a new social capital.

The popular claim that homework time is positively related to achievement gains was tested in three studies (Trautwein, 2007). The results indicate that homework assignments are positively associated with achievement

(class level effect) and that doing homework is associated with achievement gains (student-level effect). Research on homework conducted during the past three decades has consistently demonstrated a positive influence of homework on achievements as measured by tests as well as class grades (Cooper et al., 2006). Among students who may benefit from the greater learning opportunities offered by homework is the increasing population of immigrant adolescents. Twenty-two per cent of children in the United States today have at least one foreign-born parent; these students comprise the fastest-growing segment of the school-aged population (Hernández et al., 2007). A similar trend has been observed in Sweden (OECD, 2016). As many immigrant youths are learning Swedish and complex academic subjects simultaneously, they often lag behind their native-born Swedish-speaking peers in academic achievement. One way to bridge this achievement gap may be through the use of homework activities similar to those demonstrated in this article.

Since the new millennium, international research has shown the importance of well-functioning teacher-student relationships (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Hattie, et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2014). In Hattie’s meta-study, a trustful teacher-student relationship demonstrates a strong correlation factor ($d=0,72$), with a clear impact on student achievement. The students themselves emphasise the importance of the teacher’s *openness*, *care* and *respect* as fundamental values of the interpersonal relationships (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Furthermore, the students stress the significance of teachers showing concern for students’ different kinds of needs, as well as the importance of seeing the child as a person, not merely a student. Classroom research (Ljungblad, 2016) that followed teachers, who from a child’s perspective manage to meet their students in a secure way, conducive to development, presents how these teachers develop a *trustful and respectful teacher-student relationship*. The four participating teachers in the above study worked in different school types, such as compulsory school, upper secondary school and upper secondary school for students with learning disabilities. There was a wide variation among the 100 participating students, such as many students being of different kinds of special needs, as well as groups of students with severe learning disabilities. The results demonstrate in detail what happens in the now, face-to-face, between the teacher and the students; the teachers had developed a *welcoming, tolerant and non-judgmental stance* – a way of being in the moment. The teachers’ way of relating to their students emerged as adaptability that could meet student’s different kinds of needs. This form of adaptability was understood as

pedagogical tactfulness. The findings also highlight how the teachers showed belief in the students' potential and took interest in each and every student. The teachers were curious and stood by a student's side in a mutually explored process, and developed a *warm and permissive atmosphere* with their students. Over time, the teachers' pedagogical tactfulness created trustful and respectful teacher-student relationships. Hence, such a pedagogical tactfulness can be understood as fundamental to inclusive education (Ljungblad, 2019). However, in the relational field, there exists limited research focusing on interpersonal mentoring relationships in homework activities, which this article attempts to highlight.

A RELATIONAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research takes its theoretical point of departure from *Relational Pedagogy* (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010; Aspelin, 2014; Ljungblad, 2019), Historically, educational knowledge has centred on either an individual perspective or a collectivist focus; however, relational pedagogy can be seen as a new third alternative to the dominant traditions, where teaching and education are to be understood relationally. This relational perspective is based on the concept of human beings as relational beings and about teaching as relational processes. Its philosophical roots are derived from intersubjective traditions of philosophy with classical relational philosophers, such as Arendt, Levinas and Buber. Essentially, the ontological point of view places the interpersonal relationship as primary and actions as secondary (Gergen, 2009; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010). This new relational approach in educational theory rests on pluralism and diversity, emphasising the responsibility of the education system to enhance possibilities for students to participate in relational processes from the local to the global (Gergen, 2009). Such a relational view of education is based on a humanistic view that emphasises human being's existential development. In a time of measurement, it is a shift from an instrumental approach to knowledge and skills to an interpersonal and existential approach (Biesta, 2017; Saevi & Biesta, 2020). Such a view of children's growth is based on a relational view of knowledge and people (Ljungblad, 2019).

Within the field of a relational pedagogy, a new theoretical inclusive perspective *Pedagogical Relational Teachership* (PeRT) (Ljungblad, 2016, 2019) has been developed. The concept of *relational teachership* originates from empirical classroom research (Ljungblad, 2016), exploring how successful teachers relate to their students in ways that create *trustful and respectful teacher-student relationships*. Additio-

nally, PeRT was developed to support new opportunities for students to participate in their education and to emerge as unique individuals and speak with their own voices (Biesta, 2014; United Nations, 1989). PeRT has a three-dimensional model for exploring educational relationships in empirical studies, in a wider web of relations from social to societal levels. In this study, PeRT has been used to explore interpersonal relationships between students and mentors to create sustainable conditions for student participation in activities beyond school boundaries.

The second dimension of the PeRT model reveals the relationships between teachers and students. This part of the model is inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. However, it has another focus and highlights interpersonal relational processes within the education system, where (A) is the ontological point of departure that emphasises the *relationship as primary*.

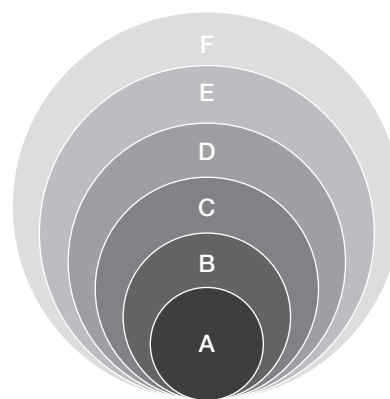


Figure 1: The second dimension of PeRT (Ljungblad, 2019).

This study analyses relational processes, conditions and values of interpersonal relationships between students and mentors. The focus of the analysis is on how the mentors relate to the students; this acknowledgement is interpreted in order to explore what kind of interpersonal relationships, relational conditions and relational values emerge over time. The micro-level (B) zooms in on the *interpersonal interaction* when mentor and student meet face-to-face. The next level (C) focuses on *the relationship* between mentors and students. The next level (D) *reveals relational aspects of what it means to teach and be a teacher*. The meso-level (E) illustrates how people in school, or in this case during homework activities, cooperate within and manage the organisation of teaching. Finally, the model shows an *overall societal macro-level* (F) with laws, political intentions, governance, power relations, research, knowledge and global influences. It is of great importance to reveal different systems that together form the social

macro system since children can belong to different macro systems depending on social belonging, ethnicity and religious backgrounds, as well as families living in various areas. Other aspects related to social macro systems are relationships within the family's and child's relationships in their spare time outside of school as part of the overall experience of participating in education. Even though the micro-, meso- and macro-levels are closely intertwined, this study mainly focuses on and analyses the B, C and D levels. These three levels were triangulated in order to deepen an understanding of the mentor-student relationship and to understand what relational conditions and values have emerged over time. Due to space constraints in this article, the observations of the interaction between mentors and students are only briefly described (Level B). However, Level B is included in the triangulation and corroboration of the results. The results are then discussed in relation to the societal (Level F) and Woolcock's (2001) characterisation of social capital. Hence, the concepts of *bonding social capital*, *bridging social capital* and linking social capital are also relevant as our project is based on trusting, connecting, belonging, including and confidence-building (Allan & Persson, 2018).

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The method that has been used in this study is a qualitative case-study (Merriam, 1998) in the spirit of ethnography. The choice of this method is based on the assumption that:

“the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important in two respects. First, it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process, and in much theory. Second, cases are important for researchers' own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research. (Flyvbejer, 2006, p. 6)

In the first phase, a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed (Bryman, 2012). During a period of six months, twenty interviews were carried out and recorded. The sampling of the interviews is primarily based on consent. The majority of the respondents were girls. The conversation lasted 30-40 minutes. In some cases, there was a second round of conversations in the form of respondent validation. Besides,

tens of hours of observations of the interaction were carried out with a focus on the mentors' ways of relating to the students. The focus of the observation revolved around gender aspects, new and veteran participants, mentor and mentoree, as well as the mediated learning experiences and relational aspects embedded in the interaction. In the final phase, all the empirical data were transcribed and analysed from a relational perspective, PeRT (Ljungblad, 2019). The first step in the analysis of the process focused on how the mentors relate to the students (Level B). Here, a relational pattern where adaptability and reciprocity became visible (Ljungblad, 2016). The next phase analysed how mentors and students talked about their participation and the interpersonal relationships in the homework activities (Levels C and D). In the interpretation, different kinds of relational conditions and values emerged over time, which were then thematised. After the analysis process, some follow-up interviews were carried out to clarify some of the details. The Findings section below presents an understanding of the students' participation in three themes, which is followed by one theme concerning the mentors' participation. Finally, a deeper understanding of relational values and conditions that developed between the mentors and the students over time are presented.

This project is supported and approved by the university leadership and goes in line with the university's vision of Widening Participation of diverse student groups. Our work is in line with engagement, listening to multiple voices and having a willingness to be self-reflective rather than adhere to 'brutal facts.' In no way are we in a position to fully and accurately present our subjects or 'even ourselves' (Lather & Smithies, 1997). Nonetheless, we have done our best to provide systematic, in-depth analysis and we have tried to write authentically and critically about the narratives offered in ways that serve the public good, including theory building, generating new knowledge and shaping public policies with a view to effect social change. To the extent possible, we have maintained the anonymity of the participants. We made every effort to get our respondents' informed consent, respect their lives, understand them, continually investigate our relationship with them and question our interpretation of them. Hence, the research process involved discovering and deriving patterns in the data and looking for general orientations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out that this kind of an approach to data analysis and interpretation involved 'making sense of the data in ways which will facilitate the continuing unfolding of the inquiry and lead to an optimal understanding of the phenomenon being studied' (p. 224).

FINDINGS

The homework activities are situated at the university in the city, requiring the students to take a long journey from their homes in the suburbs. The young people are dependent on school staff or other persons informed about the activities being carried out on the university's premises. The results show that there are various reasons why young people participate in homework activities. In the interviews, three themes have emerged: *Active support of parents*, *Forthcoming career choices* and *Special educational needs*.

Active Support of Parents

The active support of parents is paramount since the children require parental consent to enter the city in the evening to participate in homework activities at the university; this especially applies to female students. The active support of parents emerges in different ways in the family's everyday activities, such as when mothers follow their daughters to the homework activity. The parental active support also can transcend *time* and *space*, as described in the following excerpt. Aisha (16 years old) explains how her mother, as a young woman in Africa with her first son, carefully thought through her children's future opportunities:

My mother knew when she had children ... our homeland education did not work as well as in other countries. So, she thought it was better that we move to some country in the western world where the education ... can be something.

Aisha clarifies that her parents worked and were successful in Africa, and that the family is also doing well in Sweden. It was primarily the mother's thoughts about creating new opportunities for their children, by providing access to good education in different countries, which led to the decision to move to a country on another continent. Since then, the parents have actively supported the education of their five children, with homework being one of the activities that the children were encouraged to participate in.

The family of Bella (15 years old) also moved from Africa. After discussion with her parents, Bella chose not to go to the school in the suburbs where she lived, but rather attend a school in the city. Bella describes her mother's thoughts about the daughter's school choice by saying: 'Mom thought I would learn more Swedish and get a better education and a good future if I went to a "Swedish" school.' Bella emphasises the drive to deepen her Swedish language skills as the reason for attending a school where more students spoke Swedish among themselves. Therefore, her parents

are enthusiastic about actively supporting their daughter's participation in homework activities.

Forthcoming Career Choices

Sara (16 years old) has a clear focus on her future career, but she wants to keep the doors open before deciding on her occupation. Her favourite school subjects are physics and chemistry, and Sara loves to read about nuclear physics, the universe, stars and supernovas. When she looks ahead, she reflects and emphasises:

In the future, I want to do something for the outside world. I cannot change the whole world, but I want to do something important and help in the poor countries. I want to do something for the people.

When we talk about different future professions, Sara highlights various possible alternatives. At one time she contemplates, 'a dream would be the Nobel Prize.' Thus, young people's dreams about their future inspire them to wonder about different possible career choices.

Kendra (15 years old) is looking forward to her adult life, but has not yet decided what she wants to do for her career. Kendra emphasises that: 'We participate in the homework activities to get support with different topics. We come here because we want to learn.' The group she refers to includes her three girlfriends who usually come every week with Kendra. This group of girls wants to get passing grades so they can keep several career paths open in the future.

Other students have already begun to focus on a future career, such as Yonas (17 years old), who attends a technical program at upper secondary school. He wants to become a Civil Engineer in Environment and Natural Resources. Yonas is dedicated and clarifies that he could hang out with friends, but he prefers to stay home and study to get good grades, with the goal of attending university. Such a clear endeavour to achieve a special Engineering profession also implies that Yonas may renounce recreational activities during his current schooling.

Zoltis (13 years old) plays handball in her spare time. Her teacher told her about the homework activities where several volunteers are Engineers and professors proficient in mathematics. Zoltis, who wants to become an architect, thought this might be a good activity for her, as she sometimes finds herself spending too much time on social media. Participating in homework activities helps her focus on school work and at the same time receive support from well-educated mentors.

Other possible career choices that young people highlight in the interviews are doctors of various kinds, such

as surgeons, gynaecologists or dentists. One girl expresses her hope of becoming the first doctor in the family. Other professions that the students want to achieve are Engineering professionals, as well as architects, pilots, pharmacists and designers. This group of young people participating in homework activities focus on looking far ahead into the future for their career choices, which differs from the next group that emphasises the present.

Special Educational Needs

Maryam (13 years old) has passing grades in Swedish and other subjects, but not in mathematics. During a student/parent/teacher meeting, the teacher discussed Maryam's situation based on special educational needs in mathematics. The teacher informed them about homework activities and Maryam's mother, who is a single mother of four children, directly supported this opportunity and said: 'Do what you want with your life. To be able to become something, you must learn.' Maryam herself describes that she does not get the support she needs in her school, and she emphasises that mathematics teachers need to be better at explaining to students with mathematical difficulties.

Nasrin (13 years old) says that she has passing grades in other subjects, but mathematics has been difficult for her since the first day of school. According to her teacher, an assessment has been carried out, which indicates specific mathematical difficulties. Nasrin explains her mathematical work as follows: 'It's just a lot of numbers and I don't understand.' Her school has no Special Educational Needs teacher in mathematics. Furthermore, maths teachers often move to other schools, and her current maths teacher cannot explain different mathematical concepts in Swedish. Nasrin sounds resigned when she clarifies:

They just employ new mathematics teachers. It may be that a teacher tries to explain to me maybe four times. But then I still do not understand and then I cannot tell them that I do not understand... When they cannot explain the math words in Swedish it becomes even more difficult for me.

Nasrin emphasises that she needs a well-educated maths teacher who speaks Swedish. The teacher also needs to be 'more pedagogical and patient and take the time to explain in different ways and with different methods.' This is a student in need of special education aid in mathematics, who does not get the support she needs at her local school, which is the reason she participates in homework activities. Both the observation data and school staff involved in homework activities confirm that there is a group of students

who are in acute need of special education support in different school subjects.

Mentors Participation

The adults involved in the homework activities are comprised of two different groups. The first group includes pedagogues from the school, appointed by the principal, and the homework duties are part of their regular working hours. These teachers express how they appreciate the homework activity, which takes place in a different context with the students outside the usual school environment. The second group consists of mentors who reside in the city and are willing to support homework activities on a voluntary basis. When it comes to both the volunteers and the school staff, there is one common theme that emerged in all interviews, namely the desire *to support an opportunity to change the lives of the young people.*

Life Opportunities for Young People

Linda, a school pedagogue, has been involved in the project since the beginning, and emphasises a basic core value of 'how to win a childhood.' She explains her thoughts about the quality of life and life changes when young people create new contacts and see what kind of opportunities are offered outside their suburbs when they attend homework activities. Linda also meets parents who themselves are illiterate, but who 'want, want, want' their children to receive a good education, and consequently, she clarifies: 'socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects do not always go hand in hand.' Linda's colleague, Thomas, emphasises that those students who come to homework activities have 'bought the concept of doing school.' He accentuates that these young people come from families where education is important, and where 'it's deeply grounded that they all do their best in school.' Thomas also underlines that 'there is a social value' of participating in homework activities that creates emancipation with respect to lifelong-term perspective. From the students' point of view, he stresses the importance of participating one evening a week on the university campus, in a different educational environment, where one can 'meet and connect in a little different way than in school.'

It's a meeting with another world. Here the young people can calmly solve a problem with someone who is very knowledgeable ... instead of the stressed school environment. Here is peace and quiet. You can get the time you need. You can even familiarize and acquaint yourself with some adults beyond school bounds ... Interesting relationships are formed here.

The mentors have varied professional backgrounds and experiences. In common, they all have an educational interest in supporting today's young generation. Philip, a retired Engineer, became involved in the homework activities because he actively sought an activity in the municipality where he could support students in need of mathematical assistance. He finds it is interesting to get to know young people and learn about their experiences and different backgrounds. Another mentor, Richard, has also retired after working as a researcher in education. He states that 'it feels very good to spend time on something that supports young people.' The homework activity project is important and it feels like 'we can stimulate them ... and the young people get a little glow.' He raises a current problem with qualitative differences between different schools at the same time as many young people feel excluded. What inspires Richard is that he wants to share his knowledge with the young generation of today.

Noel is another mentor with an unusual background. He first educated himself as a sea captain, but after a tragic event in a suburb, he began to reconsider his career choice. Noel felt that he wanted to support new opportunities for the youth in the suburbs so he went back to university and graduated as a preschool teacher and a school leader. In addition, he moved to one of the suburbs to really 'see what kind of worlds the children are living in.' Noel explained:

I go out in the evenings and meet them, talk to parents and young people. Although it becomes my interpretations, it becomes a different perspective. It is better that you are there and feel it with body and soul ... The most precious thing you can give to someone is the time. It never comes back. You give away the most precious thing to someone else. It is beautiful! You want to be part of this. It is exciting!

What drives Noel is similar to what drives other mentors: 'Supporting a better future for the young people, one wants to be a part of a possible change.' The statement, *supporting the young people to a better future*, is a common theme that runs throughout the volunteers' remarks.

The Mentor-Student Relationship

The following section provides examples of how homework activities are typically conducted. The mentors gather shortly before the activity starts. When the students arrive, they find a place and initiate small social conversations, greet each other and ask how their friends are. After a couple of minutes, books and computers are picked up. The

mentors move around the room to make eye contact with certain students that appear to want assistance. When they make contact, the mentor will ask if he or she can offer any support. Usually, the mentor sits down next to the student and it does not take long before they are both engrossed in their work. An intense conversation starts with their heads bent over the task at hand. The mentors are engaged and their foreheads are often furrowed in deep thought. The mentors' acknowledgement emerges in form of frequent eye contact and a soft tone of voice. In the acknowledgement, the mentors show *adaptability* and *flexibility* (Ljungblad, 2016) and they listen and resolve students' questions and concerns.

The environment can be described as a quiet working atmosphere with plenty of activity. Sometimes the noise levels rise, but it is a harmonious atmosphere free of any loud disturbances. Throughout the course of an evening, many smiles and laughs emerge between the participants. One paramount characteristic of the conversations is that they take a longer time compared to what we observe in ordinary school environments, which specifies the value of the mentors engaging in a one-to-one interaction without stress. Another general pattern is that the conversations are usually about Swedish words or scientific expressions that require the students to seek clarification. At times, the mentors describe concepts with gesticulations, search for synonyms, draw pictures, explain critical aspects, while, at the same time, the students try to describe the concepts in their own words. Christian emphasises that throughout the evening he usually walks among the students and 'as long as a student has not gotten her answers, I will not leave her, which sometimes might lead to a long conversation' because these young people are seeking answers to many questions.

Over time, different types of relationships develop between the participants. Some mentors circulate and meet several young people in one evening. Other mentors usually work with the same student, like Noah and Richard who 'search for each other and sit all evening and work together.' A similar example occurs when a girl arrives a few minutes late, immediately goes up to a mentor, smiles and asks:

- How are you?
- It is just fine. How are you? he wondered smiling at her.
- I have bought a thing for you, he continues and picks up a protractor from his bag.
- This is a protractor.

The mentor begins to explain, asks questions and is interested in the student's answer.

After a while he tells that he thought of her during the week and wondered how it went for her in the math test. He listens to how she experienced the test and then emphasizes that when the next test becomes relevant, they practice together.

(From field notes, 180315)

This conversation reveals that the mentor has a *curiosity* and an interest in the student's school activity. The adult clarifies that he will be by the student's side when she needs support. The scenario shows a long-term relationship between a mentor and a student that includes the value of *trust* (Ljungblad, 2016). In the interview, the mentor also confirms that a close *trustful relationship* has developed. There are also short-term relationships emerging between the students and the mentors. In spite of the short duration of the interaction between the mentors and students, *confidence* still emerges in the interactions. Hannah (13 years old) says: 'Here I am safe. I can ask all kinds of questions. The volunteers listen to me and take the time to explain.' The students themselves describe a notable difference: 'ordinary school is boring' when the teachers teach and the students do not understand, which differs from homework activities where they are free to ask the mentors who 'can explain in a new, easier way.' Furthermore, the students support each other and there is an atmosphere of thoughtfulness among the young people which becomes evident when they try not to interject in ongoing conversations. It is a nice atmosphere and a 'break from the fuss in school,' clarifies Thomas.

The interpersonal relationships deepen over time and the students describe their memories of visiting the university for the first time. One girl, Ansha (16 years old), reveals how her first time taking the tram over the big bridge, from the suburb to downtown, was like traveling to a new world; she describes: 'It was like coming to real Sweden.' Another student, Maria (13 years old), explains her experience from the first visit: 'I was so nervous when I entered the university campus the first time. It was intimidating, but now it feels safe and comfortable.' Having participated in the activities for several years, Nathalie (16 years old) and Amid (16 years old) talk about their experiences in a mutual manner: 'When you say to yourself that you will do your homework at the University of Gothenburg, it is a different thing, compared to doing it at the public libraries. Then I have a plan. It's more professional. I have a plan and a goal. You make your own decision ... It's not like at school. In homework activities you come primarily to improve your know-

ledge. In school you have a schedule that you have to strictly follow. But here, you come because you have a will of your own.' When discussing how they view their relationships with the volunteers, Amid clarifies: 'I would say that relationships are stronger here ... They are volunteers ... Compared to the ordinary school, where it is obvious that the teachers' job is to teach ... Some of the teachers have the passion at the ordinary school. But here the volunteers come by their own will, it is not that they have to.' Nathalie clarifies her experiences by saying: 'Here I feel safe. You get closer to some volunteers than others ... You build a relationship. In the classroom, it is usually a teacher who needs to help everybody. Then, the teacher may not be able to catch up with all students and then you will not get the help you need. Here, the volunteers sit with me until I really understand.' The students also reflect on the feeling of spending a lot of time at the university and emphasise that they are now used to and feel comfortable studying within the premises of the university. The young people clarify that if they had not participated in this homework project, their positive experiences towards higher education would not have been as strong. As a result of these experiences the young people begin to believe: 'Now I know that university is a possibility for me!'

Summary

Investigating the reasons for the *students' participation* in the homework activities in the university setting reveals that there are some barriers that need to be bridged. The challenges are tied to the active support of the parents, as well as finding ways to travel into the city in the evenings. The young people's participation can be seen in the light of two-time aspects. One group of students with special needs stresses the importance of immediate support from well-educated pedagogues that can explain new Swedish concepts in different ways. The other group of students looks more into the future and at their forthcoming carrier choices. The mentors support the students with information about different kinds of professions that the young people have not heard of before, as well as clarify what preconditions will help them be eligible to pursue higher education (cf. Ainsworth, 2002; Noam et al., 2002; Suárez et al., 2016). The main reason for the *volunteers' participation* is to support young people in seeking a better future; the mentors give their time to inspire the young people, and genuinely *want to change the young people's lives*.

When the students came to the university for the first time, they appreciated that some teachers from the school joined the activity. By exploring the relational scenarios

of what happens when the volunteers and students meet face-to-face, (Ljungblad, 2016, 2019; Marciano et al., 2019), a deeper interpersonal understanding of mentor-student relationships was achieved. The results highlight different kinds of *relational conditions and relational values* (Gergen, 2009). The volunteers share *confidence* and high expectations of the students' potential, they are *curious*, and *listen* to the students' questions and explain concepts in different ways. Furthermore, the volunteers prove they are flexible by adapting in a pedagogical tactful way to the students' different needs (Ljungblad, 2016). The atmosphere surrounding the students is harmonious, calm, free of stress and it includes plenty of engagement and humour. Such an atmosphere, manifested in a socially enjoyable setting, is meaningful for young people to participate in their school work.

In the homework activities, some interesting relationships were formed, and the results of the research indicate two types of relationships: short-term relationships where students felt *confident* and dared to ask their questions and long-term relationships where a mentor and a student got to know each other well. In such interpersonal relationships, deep relational values like trust emerge (Ljungblad, 2016), which can have a lasting impact on the young person's life.

DISCUSSION

This study has shown that there are obstacles that need to be bridged for young people to successfully participate in homework activities at a university setting. The parents need to actively support their children and solve problems concerning how, in particular, the girls can travel into the city at night. An important pattern in the results is that close and trusting relationships between the children and parents are foundational for new opportunities opening up. Even close relationships between the young people can be important as peer groups travel together by public transport to the university and interact playfully during the study. Once parents support their children's participation in the homework activities, new opportunities arise for students who need extra support in their current schooling, but also for their upcoming career choices.

During the homework activities, volunteers have more time for in-depth conversations, which differs from an ordinary school environment. The mentors who have professional pedagogical competence can explain problematic concepts in a multitude of ways. The results highlight the importance of the mentor's engagement in and acknow-

ledgement of the interaction, characterised by *adaptability* and *flexibility* (Ljungblad, 2016). Overall, interesting short-term and long-term relationships between mentors and young people are being developed. The interpersonal relationships grow over time and develop into an atmosphere of relational values, where *confidence* and *trust* emerge (Ljungblad, 2016). Such mentor-student relationships at a university setting also open new opportunities towards what is offered outside the suburbs.

This study highlights the relational room, *the in-between* (Biesta, 2014), the face-to-face interaction, which creates a deeper understanding of the relationship between student and mentor (Marciano et al., 2019). The findings reveal two dimensions, highlighting both the present and the future. First, the importance of creating opportunities for the students' social participation—the social and relational values of *the child's being* in the moment—which explicates the existential horizon (Ljungblad, 2019). Second, the relational conditions, relational values and interpersonal relationships, such as *connecting, belonging, including, trusting and confidence building* that evolved over time create a movement, which highlights another social aspect, namely, a new social and relational capital (cf. Allan & Persson, 2018). This new *interpersonal relational capital* can support the *child's becoming*; it can be understood as a relational and social capital with transformative power for the young people's future possibilities. Hence, trustful and sustainable mentor-student relationships in homework activities show opportunities for a young person's change into *being*, as well as *becoming* (Ljungblad, 2019). Accordingly, students' participation has a social and relational value of being in the moment, since we become somebody within a relationship (Gergen, 2009). As young people participate in such social space with new interpersonal relationships, and occupy a new social position, an elevated *interpersonal relational capital* is developed where 'one is given the opportunity to occupy a different position than that which one was born into' (Säfström, 2015, p. 23 *our translation*). These opportunities might enhance social mobility to a more positive social capital (cf. Labianca & Brass, 2006; Bang et al., 2009; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017).

Research shows that lack of positive role models is responsible for students not being aware of how education can benefit upward social mobility (Ainsworth, 2002; Noam et al., 2002; Suárez et al., 2016). The mentors in this project have attempted to bridge this gap with regard to positive role models. Woolcock's (2001) characterisation of *bonding social capital, bridging social capital and linking social capital* has been found to be relevant as an analytical tool for this specific project and continuing work. The

exposure to positive role models within a university setting can encourage the students to aim high. The analyses of the encounters between students and mentors illustrate how such an *interpersonal relational capital* can launch a *movement*, and develop a new insight that ‘the university is for me.’ Hence, a change in social position leads to a new social capital that goes beyond the group belonging. These endeavours help create sustainable relationships, which include race, ethnicity and diversity within educational institutions (Berhanu, 2016; Ljungblad, 2016; Freeman & Kochan, 2018). Thus, trying to understand this power for social change is a springboard to a new, improved educational capital with new opportunities and future careers.

This study confirms the importance of ‘enriching’ activities, such as community development in the form of supporting immigrant youth in homework activities, to improve engagement, raise achievement levels and enhance

inclusiveness in the larger social fabric. The project is still underway in the spirit of *Afterschool Education: Approaches to an Emerging Field* (Noam et al., 2002). Allan and Persson (2018) have summed up their study, which is in the same line of thinking as ours, so succinctly: ‘Inclusive education plays a more important role than ever before in mitigating these risks through the cultivation of trust and confidence’ (p. 9–10). The results underscore the importance of interpersonal *relational capital* at different educational strata that can broaden opportunities for young people to have a better future.

To conclude, the implications of this study are important for raising awareness with the hope of replicating similar homework activity projects at other universities. Essentially, institutions of higher education can be a hub, a meaningful meeting place which dismantles isolation and promotes inclusion.

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