**A peer-mentoring scheme for immigrant students in English secondary schools: a support mechanism for promoting inclusion?**

Kyriaki Messiou, University of Southampton, k.messiou@soton.ac.uk

Marta Cristina Azaola, University of Southampton, M.C.Azaola@soton.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Immigration in Europe has increased rapidly over the last years. As a result, schools are accepting students arriving from other countries at various stages of the school year. This can be a challenging process both for students and for schools. This paper describes the introduction of a peer mentoring scheme to support immigrant students in three English schools, which took part in a European Union funded project that involved five countries. Data from semi-structured interviews with mentors, mentees and facilitators were analysed and highlighted a number of positive impacts, such as getting support from mentors, making new friends and increased confidence both for mentors and mentees. However, it seems that the way that the programme was implemented in the English schools, focused only on the individual students, rather than having an impact on the whole school. The implications of such an approach in relation to inclusion are discussed.

**Keywords:** immigration, inclusion, peer-mentoring, schools

**Introduction**

Movement of populations is greater than ever before across the world. In Europe net migration has tripled since 1960 (Public Policy and Management Institute, 2013). According to the International Organisation for Migration, in 2015 alone, over one million migrants arrived to Europe and in the first two months of the current year, over 120,000 people have arrived by sea (IOM, 2016). Given the current situation, with immigrants coming from various parts of the world into Europe, the numbers of immigrant students in schools are increasing and are likely to increase even more in the forthcoming years.

Research from various parts of the world highlights a number of challenges that immigrant students are experiencing in new school environments, such as learning a new language, making new friends, and familiarising themselves with a new system of education (Dusi and Steinbach, 2016; Kwong, 2011; Reynolds, 2008; Valdés, 2004). At the same time, the need for support for these students is also highlighted. It can be argued that peer mentoring is an approach that can be seen as way of supporting such students.

This paper explores the implications of using one mentoring scheme that focused on supporting immigrant students in three secondary schools in England. We adopt the term “immigrant students”, which is used by the Organisation for Economic Development and Development (2015b). In the report, the term is used to refer both to first and second generation immigrant students. At the same time, we acknowledge that this is a very heterogenous group of students, taking into account the differences between individual students, as well as their varying experiences, due to the differences of contexts from which they came from and where they are currently educated. In addition, the experiences between first and second-generation immigrants are likely to be very different.

**Challenges in schools for immigrant students**

A number of challenges as experienced by students who come into a new country have already been mentioned. In addition, research evidence from Spain, shows that immigrant students struggle more than native students to complete compulsory education and continue on post-compulsory education (Merino and Garcia, 2011). Similar evidence was obtained in Finland where immigrant students are three times more likely to accomplish compulsory education at the age of 24, instead of at the age of 16, compared to the native population (Rinne and Jaervinen, 2011).

Research evidence suggests that policy makers should identify immigrants’ high dropout rates at upper secondary education and implement special language programmes aimed at this population in their late-teens in order to avoid high-school dropouts (Colding et al., 2009; Goldner and Epstein, 2014).

Makarova and Herzog (2013) focused on students who are present at school but disengaged in their learning, what they called ‘hidden dropout rates’. They found that immigrant boys in Swiss primary schools are at higher risk than immigrant girls of dropping out from school. They concluded that students’ relationships with teachers are crucial in order to avoid dropout, especially during the early years of school. Therefore, the issue of student-teacher relationship seems to be important in supporting these students in schools.

A recent report from OECD (2015a) “Helping immigrant students to succeed at school - and beyond” highlights that there are big differences across countries in the educational, social and emotional success of immigrant students, and therefore there is much that can be learnt by sharing experiences amongst countries. At the same time, a number of factors can play a crucial role in supporting these students in schools, as discussed in the next section.

**Supporting immigrant students in schools**

According to Miravet and García (2013) schools that understand diversity as an asset are able to implement equality policies that are developed through a community approach, unlike schools implementing approaches based on deficit thinking. According to them, a commitment on equality, respect, autonomy, and solidarity should be reflected in every aspect of a school, which implies a change in pedagogical practices. Sales et al. (2012) argue that ‘critical active participation in society’ (p.911) can be achieved through an inclusive model. Therefore, although cultural diversity represents a challenge for teachers, it needs to be acknowledged and promoted. According to Walton et al., (2013) students and teachers need to take a critical approach toward cultural diversity and foster intercultural contact. Through an examination of the literature on interculturality, they conclude that intercultural understanding needs to be incorporated as a whole-school approach rather than add-on to the curriculum.

In most countries, there is an emphasis on learning the native language, since this has been highlighted as one of the major challenges for this group of students. This is achieved in various ways, for example, through the introduction of separate classes, such as the introductory classes in Norway for what they call ‘newly arrived minority language students’. It has been argued that such efforts can lead to the creation of barriers to inclusion (Hilt, 2016). Similar challenges are mentioned by Avery (2016) in relation to the tutoring programmes that operate in Sweden.

Montero et al., (2012) claim that effective school programmes aimed at increasing students’ sense of belonging need to look at students’ experiences and change school practices in order to help students to become active and successful participants in society. Similarly, Dusi and Steinbach (2016), in their study that involved immigrant students in primary schools in Italy, highlighted the importance of personal relationships with classmates and teachers in order to have a strong sense of belonging in schools. In addition, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) in their study of four schools in Australia and the ways in which they support refugee students, highlight two features as being particularly important: school ethos and an inclusive approach.

In the light of this context, schools have a duty to develop environments that are inclusive for all students (Ainscow, 1999; Messiou, 2012). Inclusion is seen as a process that is concerned with the presence, participation and achievement of all students (Ainscow et al. 2006). It is also described by the same authors as a principled approach to education.

In order to develop inclusive environments, barriers to learning and participation need to be identified and removed through a restructuring of existing practices (Ainscow, 2014; Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Messiou, 2017; Slee, 2011). In other words, a move away from approaches that blame individuals for difficulties that they experience in education is needed (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998). However, as Opertti, Walker and Zhang (2014) argue, this idea of transformation of the whole education system is still not happening in many regions of the world, where the focus is on deficit ways of viewing individuals, such as those defined as having special educational needs, or belonging in other marginalised groups.

The above ideas relate to the ideas presented by Nieto (2010) about multicultural education. As she argues, multicultural education is about transformation in four different levels: individual, collective, institutional and ideological. She highlights that the one that is most difficult to transform is the ideological level, but emphasises the need to take all four into account in order to understand the sociopolitical context of education. Similarly, inclusive education, as mentioned above by Opertti et al. (2014), requires the transformation of the whole education system in various countries, which has to include the four levels mentioned by Nieto (2010). In addition, Banks (1996) identified and described five dimensions that teachers can use in order to guide their work in their efforts to respond to student diversity. These are: content integration, which refers to the extent to which teachers use examples from a variety of culture; knowledge construction, which focuses on how knowledge is constructed and by whom; prejudice reduction which focuses on students’ racial attitudes and how these can be challenged; an equity pedagogy which focuses on modifying learning and teaching to facilitate the achievement of all students, and; an empowering school structure and social structure. Furthermore, Ramsey (2015) argues that the purpose of multicultural education is to engage children in understanding and challenging the injustices that exist in the world. She also suggests that the goals of multicultural education are for children to develop strong flexible identities, sense of connection, critical thinking skills, confidence and persistence and optimism and activism. It could be argued that one of the ways, in which the above can be achieved, is through the introduction of peer mentoring schemes, such as the one described in this paper.

**Peer support and mentoring benefits**

The term ‘peer support’ is rather broad, without an agreed definition in the literature, and refers to a range of activities where support is given from one individual to another through appropriate training. In schools, when such approaches are used, usually students are put in cross age pairs, with the older student supporting the younger student. Here we summarise some of the support systems in schools that fall under the broad umbrella term of peer support, whilst we focus more specifically on mentoring as one form of peer support, since this was the approach used in our study.

Cowie and Wallace (2000) divide the approaches in two broad categories: those that emphasise emotional support, and those that emphasise education and information giving. Houlston, Smith, and Jessel (2009) carried out a survey to map out the way peer support is provided in primary and secondary schools in England. Their findings suggest that 62 % of schools offer peer support in England (structured peer support scheme). In addition, they suggest that peer support is used more in secondary schools (68%) than in primary schools (57 %).

According to the same authors, peer support can take one of the following four forms: befriending approaches (78 %), mentoring approaches (56.5 %), mediation approaches (53.2 %), counselling approaches (18.8 %) and others (6.7 %). For primary schools in England, they found that befriending is the most commonly used approach, whereas mentoring comes second. For secondary schools in England, mentoring comes first, whereas befriending comes second. It is clear, therefore, that mentoring, which is the approach used in our study, is a commonly used approach in English schools.

Authors have argued that there is not an agreed definition in the literature about mentoring in education (e.g. Budge, 2006; Jacobi,1991), a term that has its roots in the discipline of business. Mentoring schemes have been found to have consistent positive effects in different countries, across varied age groups (from young children to adults) and in different areas of the curriculum **(**Higgins et al,2011). In addition, the positive effects of a peer mentoring programme to combat bullying in schools has been reported by Banerjee, Robinson and Smalley (2010). Their study found that the peer mentors themselves felt that through the training and the experience of the mentoring scheme they had personal gains, something that was also felt by the school staff that took part in the scheme. Similar positive effects of reducing bullying for victims in schools through the use of a range of peer support systems (including mentoring) are also reported by Naylor and Cowie (1999). In addition, positive effects on mentees are reported by Beattie, and Holden (1994) in their study, where they saw mentees changing attitudes towards school, becoming more confident and having a clearer view about their future, through their engagement with a peer mentoring scheme.

Peer mentoring schemes that target immigrant students in schools are usually ones that involve university students as mentors supporting students (Crul and Schneider, 2014). Such programmes report similar benefits to those mentioned in the studies above. However, despite the benefits of mentoring programmes that have been documented in the literature, more research about how these are perceived by students themselves appears to be needed. In addition, mentoring programmes for immigrant students, that involve students from the same schools as mentors, instead of university students, seem to be absent from the literature.

The project on which this paper is based addressed this gap in peer mentoring: school students taking the role of mentors to support their immigrant schoolmates. The project, entitled “INTO: Intercultural tools to support migrant students in schools”, was funded with the support of the European Commission. It piloted a peer mentoring scheme which was originally developed by Oxfam Italia and Oxfam Intercultura Italia. The aim of the scheme was to train students in secondary schools as mentors to support their immigrant peers and to make comparisons as to how the scheme was implemented in different contexts. The scheme was piloted in five European countries, including England. Here we are referring only to how the project was piloted in three English secondary schools, with a primary focus on students’ and adults’ experiences, and the implications of using such schemes in schools. The paper addresses the following questions:

* What are students’ and adults’ views of a peer-mentoring scheme for supporting immigrant students?
* What are the implications for schools when using such schemes for promoting inclusion?

**The scheme and how it was used in the English schools**

An introductory seminar took place where all schools from the region were invited to participate. As a result, three schools chose to take part in the pilot. The coordinators of the project from the schools had the following roles: EAL (English as an additional language) coordinators, Learning Hub manager, and SEN (Special Educational Needs) intervention worker. The project coordinators received one-day training at the university about multicultural education and how they can support immigrant students in schools. Following the training they had to identify students that would take the role of mentors from their schools. Each school was asked to choose up to eight students to become mentors. They also started debating when the mentoring sessions could take place. All agreed that mentoring outside school hours would not be feasible in the English context; therefore, sessions would have to be out of lesson time, preferably during tutor sessions or at lunch time. At the same time, they all decided that the mentors should have a migrant background.

Sixteen students (five boys and 11 girls, ages 12- 16) were trained to become mentors and subsequently, supported 15 mentees (seven boys and eight girls, ages 12- 16) in their schools. School 1 had six mentors and seven mentees, School 2 had five mentors and three mentees, and School 3 had five mentors and five mentees. These numbers were disproportionate of the numbers of immigrants in each of the schools, since the schools were asked to have up to eight mentors. School 1 had 10.4 % of students registered as having English as an additional language, School 2 had 6.7 % and School 3 had 18.3 %.

The mentors were trained at the university with an emphasis on the skills that a mentor needs to develop in order to support other students. The students involved (both mentors and mentees) came from a number of countries, such as Brazil, France, Greece, India, Kenya, Lithuania, Pakistan, Italy, Poland, Romania, South Africa and Spain. Some mentees had arrived at their new school as little as one month previously. Some mentors had been in England for just over two years, others even less. We did not ask any information regarding the immigration status of the students (e.g. asylum seekers, economic migrants, refugees), since we considered this information to be confidential and sensitive.

In all the participating schools, the coordinators selected the students that would become mentors and mentees, and invited them to take part in the project. Though they were given a list of criteria to choose mentors and mentees (such as, those struggling with learning, newly arrived in the country for mentees; and for mentors, those likely to be good role models for others), they had flexibility in choosing the students and then pairing them up. Permissions were sought from their parents to participate. Apart from one pair where mentor and mentee were coming from the same country, this was not the case for any other pair. In addition, there was another pair where the mentor (from Spain) could speak the mentee’s first language (Portuguese).

Mentors and mentees usually met at least once a week over a period of five months. Sometimes they met even every day, if needed, as flexibility was allowed in the organisation of the scheme at the school level. Each mentee was paired up with a mentor or, on one occasion, with two mentors.

Initially, mentors used a set of open ended questions that they had to ask the mentees (prepared for the purposes of the pilot) in order to get to know them and probe whether they like school, what they use to do in their free time and so on. They also had a learning log where they could write down any problems related to the mentoring scheme and the solutions undertaken. During the mentoring sessions, mentors were either advising mentees on issues that they wanted to highlight, help them with their homework, or just giving them an opportunity to speak their same language whenever possible.

**Methodology**

The data analysed was generated in the three secondary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews carried out with 11 mentors, 12 mentees and the five female coordinators from the three schools. Some of these were individual interviews (eleven), whilst others were carried out in focus groups (six). Of these, four focus groups and two individual interviews were conducted by both of us, whilst the rest were conducted by one of us individually. Some mentees were interviewed with the presence of a translator, due to the fact that they were newly arrived in the country and could not express themselves in English. One focus group and one individual interview with Spanish and Italian speaking mentees respectively were facilitated by one of the researchers (who speaks Italian and Spanish), whereas two individual interviews with Polish speaking mentees were facilitated by a mentor and a school coordinator respectively. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and some were also filmed as part of the production of a video for the funded project. The study had gained ethical approval from the University in advance. Pseudonyms were used and schools were numbered to protect the participants’ anonymity.

The interviews with the students (both mentors and mentees) focused on their experiences as immigrants in another country, and, secondly, their views of the peer mentoring scheme. The interviews with the adult coordinators focused on their views of the implementation of the peer mentoring scheme.

In order to provide rich and detailed account of the data, thematic analysis was undertaken with the purpose of critically explore participants’ narrative material through the identification of common threads across our dataset. NVivo 10 software was used to facilitate the process.

**Findings: Benefits and challenges of the mentoring scheme**

Our analysis identified both benefits and challenges for mentors, mentees and the schools that took part in the mentoring scheme. We present our findings under five themes: empathy between mentors and mentees; getting support; making new friends; mentors developing certain skills; and implications for schools.

*Empathy between mentors and mentees*

A crucial aspect of investigation was to understand the feelings that immigrant students have when moving to a new country. Mentees reported feeling sad, anxious, lonely, lost and confused at the beginning. Although some of them were happy to be learning in a new country, they were often scared and unable to ask for help. Some reported keeping their questions to themselves until they arrived home to ask their parents. Others wanted to stay at home due to their inability to understand the language and their feelings of loneliness. A few reported cases of bullying in relation to not being able to speak the language or count numbers properly.

Students not only had to adapt to a new school but also to a new culture. For example:

Well, culture is different, so sometimes, in Africa, you don’t look at older people straight into their eyes but this side you have to. So, I kind of felt like it was really difficult to get used to that. [Olivia, mentee, school 1]

Due to the fact that all mentors had an immigrant background, feelings of empathy were able to flourish between mentors and mentees. Mentors reported having similar feelings when they just arrived to England, which helped them to understand the needs of their mentees and the difficulties they were going through. Conversely, mentees also reported satisfaction at knowing that their mentors were able to understand what they were experiencing. For example:

It was very happy for me knowing that there would be someone to come and help me and with my English and all that. And when I first found out about it, I was very happy to participate in it because my mentor as well wasn’t originally from here, so it was really nice knowing how she experienced, how she got into the culture here in England. [Dafne, mentee, school 2]

Coordinators were aware of the empathy developed between mentors and mentees. For example, the coordinator in school 3, explained that all her mentors had recently arrived to the country and knew how difficult adaptation was for them. According to another coordinator:

I do think it has, sort of like, taught them that it is important for us to be mindful of other people around us within school and that basically we all go through a transition where we might be fine and actually we might need some support in some kind of way and there are other options than having to rely on a teacher. [coordinator 2, school 2]

Prior to the implementation of this pilot, mentors had to rely on informal support, either in or out of school, to get used to their new school environment. However, the majority of participants believe that school adaptation is facilitated when at school ‘there is someone there for you’. Mentors were always positive and tried to convey hopeful messages to their mentees. As one mentor said:

I think at first it is a little bit hard for people who came here but the mentor is really helpful because you can talk with people and it’s kind of really friendly and make the situation really easier to get familiar with the place. [Sara, mentor, school 3]

*Getting support*

The first priority for all mentees was to get help with English. Some arrived with very poor English others with none at all. Consequently, providing language support to mentees was one of the main tasks of mentors, thanks to which, the majority of mentees were able to quickly improve their English and come out of their shell. For example:

Having a mentor is very nice because he help you with language, with friendships, with I don’t know, it’s nice because if I came from other country he help me with language and yes. [Karina, mentee, school 3]

Online translation services were a frequently used tool for language support used by teachers and mentors when mentees had very poor English. In one of the schools, one mentee referred to an electronic tablet that was provided to him to be able to translate words in English, and thus convey messages and communicate with others. Unfortunately, the number of available tablet devices in the participating schools was not enough to support all those who required one. Alongside providing language support, mentors were given practical support, such as information related to the school’s facilities, timetables, school policies, etc. Academic support was also part of the scheme, and mentors provided help with reading and homework. Pastoral support, when needed, was also provided.

Thanks to the intense and varied support received, mentees’ adaptation and confidence was seen to improve gradually. As one of the coordinators explained:

Watching some of the students grow in the process and just see their confidence and see how they maybe feel, they have moved on from when they came to the school as a migrant and how they managed to fit in. [coordinator 1, school 2]

Due to the flexibility allowed within the scheme, mentors were able to meet their mentees more regularly if needed, and many showed they really cared about their mentees’ well-being. For example:

The only reason I meet him like every day is because I think he really needs this. It’s just talking in the same language to him makes him feel better in another country I think. [Laura, mentor, school 1]

*Making new friends*

Once the initial language barriers were overcome, the second priority for mentees was to make new friends. When mentees were asked about advice to give to newly arrived students, the majority believed that talking to others and avoiding shyness were the most important things an immigrant student should try to do.

Mentees believed that socialisation has a snowball effect, as one person can introduce others and eventually avoid isolation. Some even reported that making friends is the best way to learn English. The advantages of making new friends were not only confined to mentees. By participating in the mentoring scheme mentors were also benefiting from meeting new people and making friends. This meant that they learnt to get along with people and to interact with students from different backgrounds. They also felt that they were able to deal with different personalities and respect different viewpoints. For example:

Well, I had a mentee which was very shy and didn’t want to talk to anyone. So, you know, it comes with peoples' personalities: you can become friends no matter what. [Arif, mentor, school 1]

In addition, the relationship between mentors and mentees could grow in such a way that mentors are able to learn about their mentees’ culture and vice versa. As one mentee said:

She learned about my culture, how it is in Greece and I learnt how it is here and we kind of gave each other some push and we helped each other to learn about the cultures. She helped me in my English as well. [Dafne, mentee, school 2]

Coordinators were also aware of friendships forged through the mentoring scheme. As the coordinator in school 3 explained:

With time they developed friendships in the school, but also they kept the mentors as good friends. I know that they emailed each other, they met out of school sometimes and I know they ask for help over the internet as well, and I know they received it as well. [coordinator 1, school 3]

*Mentors developing certain skills*

Apart from being able to make new friends, by taking part in the mentoring scheme, mentors were able to gain multiple skills that would benefit them in the longer term. On several occasions, mentors had to come out of their comfort zone, overcoming their own shyness and talking to people who had specific requirements that needed to be met. Mentees were often sharing their problems with their mentors who in turn had to find alternatives even if most of the times they could not solve the issues by themselves. These experiences helped to build mentors’ confidence. Mentors’ confidence increased when they realised that their support actually helped mentees to become more social, as one mentor explained:

I actually organised for them to meet up and we had a whole day talking Spanish and English and now they are always together at lunch. They are like the best sort of friends and when I look at them I am like that was because of me and it actually kind of helps you. [Nadia, mentor, school 1]

Their achievements helped mentors to feel proud of themselves. Mentors felt they were in charge of the given situation, which instilled a sense of responsibility amongst them. The mentoring scheme also allowed mentors to be role models for their mentees, whilst at the same time taking up leadership roles within the school. They could see that they were helping the school to make a difference to new students coming in. As one project coordinator explained:

It gave them the confidence. Ok now I am the mentor, so it is my responsibility to look after younger people and it is possible they wouldn’t really normally see them because they would be occupied with their own lives and their own studies. They are all year 11 students after all and being a mentor you know, ok it is my job, it is my responsibility to look after the younger ones and I think they did a wonderful job. [coordinator 1, school 3]

Mentors were able to develop different skills because of their participation in the mentoring scheme. For instance, some students reported being more patient and able to work in groups. Some others got inspired and started to have an idea of what they would like to do in the future. Others were mindful about their teachers. For example:

It does give you a lot of responsibility; it tells you that teaching isn’t easy, it shows you that the teachers do take a lot of effort and time to make lessons actually likeable for the students. I think this gives an insight to how teaching is. [Molly, mentor, school 1]

Ultimately mentors knew that by taking part in the mentoring scheme and gaining a range of different skills they were not only helping immigrant students settling in at school but in the future, it could also yield a personal return that might help to open new opportunities for them. For example:

It’s good for you also because on your CV if someone sees they will want to hire you because it’s a good experience to have for the jobs. And if you want to work with other people it will always be good to have some of that experience as well. [Sofia, mentor, school 2]

However, participation in the mentoring scheme was not always a bed of roses for mentors, since they encountered some challenges along the way. The most difficult one was when their mentees did not speak English. On these occasions, mentors did struggle to understand and provide help. Fortunately, mentors were creative enough to come up with solutions such as drawing pictures as a way of communication, or using the online translation services.

*Implications for schools*

The coordinators involved in managing the mentoring scheme had roles such as English as an Additional Language Coordinators and SEN Managers, and were the main responsible staff for the welfare of immigrant students in their schools. Though their titles were different, their roles were of similar nature, in the sense that they were supporting certain students individually or in small groups. As such, there do not appear to be any differences in the way that the scheme was implemented or in the ways that it had an impact on the students or the schools. The implementation of the scheme represented for them an extra support. For example:

At the beginning, I was a little bit apprehensive about the programme. I just did not quite imagine that it would work because I tend to take the whole responsibility of everything that I do on myself and I just did not know that I could trust the students to do a wonderful job as they actually did. The programme opened my mind that I do not have to be everywhere all the times and that I have people who are willing to help, and I could trust them to do it. And sometimes, to be honest, they were better than I would be. For example, when a student had a friendship issue she would rather speak to her mentor than me. [coordinator 1, school 3]

Academically, the coordinators also recognised that the help provided by mentors with reading, homework and language had very positive effects because sometimes mentees felt more comfortable to ask a mentor for explanation and clarification rather than a teacher. The coordinators also commented on the accessibility of mentors compared to the busy schedules teachers often have. Another advantage was the bonding created within EAL/SEN departments. For example:

Somehow these kids feel like they belong to a proper department of their own, which I don’t think they had before and the mentoring certainly has helped that. I feel that they are kind of a group together, you know, because it’s a structure really and our face is in it as well. So, it has helped to bring us all together which is lovely. [coordinator 1, school 1]

Prior to the implementation of this pilot, all the schools had a buddy scheme in operation for all new students. However, it differed substantially from the aims and methods of the mentoring scheme. For example, the buddy scheme is more informal and there is not necessarily that continuous input from the coordinators, as with this mentoring scheme. It tends to provide practical support (timetables, logistics) instead of academic support, and is not tailored specifically for the needs of immigrant students. Moreover, most of the buddies are local students with no experience of moving away and who speak only English.

As a result, mentors and coordinators seemed to be well aware of the benefits that the mentoring scheme represented for their schools. With the academic and pastoral support provided to immigrant students, a group generally associated with low attainment could start performing better in class. It would be interesting to see whether, through long term the implementation of systematic mentoring schemes, immigrant students can perform better and positively affect schools’ performance. According to participants, the mentoring scheme could potentially have a positive impact even with children who are out-of-school. For example:

I think if more students feel more confident and more respected, I think more people will like to go to schools. And many people, like where I come from, are kind of holding back themselves, they are kind of scared so then they don’t have much time to make new friends. So, if they understand that there are mentors and people that can help them, then more people will like to come to schools and like from different countries. I think that would actually help. [Arif, mentor, school 1]

After the pilot, all the coordinators saw great potential for the mentoring scheme to be implemented in their schools. And many mentees showed an interest in becoming mentors themselves:

I think we are going to carry on with the programme and I already have students asking if they could be mentors in the future and I am really grateful and really it’s a very positive feeling because I can see that there are students who feel they have received something and now they want to give it back. [coordinator 1, school 3]

Despite the advantages, the initial implementation of the scheme proved to be challenging for the schools involved. Given the varied and busy schedules of the EAL/SEN departments, and even if the staff involved were willing to implement the mentoring scheme, finding the time for the scheme itself was not easy. As one coordinator explained:

I think what was particularly difficult, mainly from both of our point of view, is just the general nature of our jobs. So, obviously, we showed willingness to be part of this scheme because we thought it is important to introduce such a programme to our school. But because we do lots of varied roles, and I know that my colleague was out and about in sort of home visits and things like that, the logistics of it actually running we found to be more of a problem than what we did envisage before. [coordinator 2, school 2]

Another challenge was that the mentoring scheme was not used as a whole school approach. The benefits for mentors, mentees and the schools already illustrated appear to have an isolated impact at the individual level, instead of having an impact on the whole school. The three schools involved reported that the majority of their colleagues knew nothing about this new scheme and that those who did felt reassured that they did not have to provide extra support to immigrant students themselves.

After the pilot, the coordinators planned to talk to their headteachers, as they felt the need to involve the whole school on the mentoring scheme. They were also keen to share their experiences with their school’s colleagues through emails, newsletter, INSET (training) days, etc. As one coordinator explained:

I would expect that people would be interested, so we kind of do need to push people which is fine but now it would be good to say to our headteacher we have been involved in this for a few months, this is what we are at now, this is where we would like to take it to the next stage. [coordinator 1, school 2]

**Discussion and conclusion**

As illustrated through the examples above, the scheme had a number of positive impacts on mentors and mentees, as well as on the school’s work. As highlighted earlier,learning a new language, making new friends, and familiarising themselves with a new system of education (Dusi and Steinbach, 2016; Kwong, 2011; Reynolds, 2008; Valdés, 2004) are amongst the challenges that immigrant students face, and we saw how these areas were addressed through the mentoring scheme in the participating schools. All students in the study highlighted how the mentors could play a crucial role in addressing such barriers. Therefore, it seems that there is potential in implementing such a scheme in order to facilitate efforts in the schools to include immigrant students.

Whilst mentors, mentees and the schools involved benefited directly by taking part in the pilot, we argue that the benefits payoff at different times for these three groups. Mentees are able to see and take advantage of the support received, during and straight after the mentoring scheme intervention. The benefits for mentors are supposedly more applicable in the long-term, once students move to either upper secondary or to the labour market through the demonstration of the gained skills. We also argue that the benefits for both mentors and mentees are likely to stay constant in participants even if they have ceased their participation in the mentoring scheme. In other words, the mentoring scheme has the potential to make participants aware of the importance of the provision of support to others and be mindful about the needs of multicultural societies inside as well as outside school.

However, schools do need to make a constant effort in designing, implementing and developing the mentoring scheme if the benefits are to be sustainable in the long-term. As Banskak et al., (2015:141) explain, although parental education is a key determinant for the educational achievement of second generation immigrants, the structure of a country’s educational system does matter, as “school systems that provide more opportunity for interaction between the various immigrant generations [are] likely to foster more rapid integration”.

At the same time, such schemes have to be used with caution. Though the practitioners acknowledged the creation of a distinctive group as a strength, that was facilitating the sense of belonging amongst those students, the opposite could also be argued: that such practices could further marginalise individuals and groups of students, by setting them apart as being “different” to the rest.

Such practices are not compatible with the principles of inclusion and can create exclusion in schools for students, as found in Hilt’s study (2016). In addition, as the practitioners highlighted, the scheme was not viewed as a whole school approach but rather as an approach that was the responsibility of the few that deal with these groups of students. As mentioned earlier, a whole school approach is important (Walton et al, 2013) in reflecting an inclusive school ethos. It seems, therefore, that the scheme and how it was implemented in these English schools, only managed to operate at an individual and collective level but failed to move to the institutional level (Nieto, 2010).

One of the reasons that this might have happened could be related to the way that many English schools tend to operate. For example, having the role of EAL coordinator seems to create an expectation that it is the individuals’ responsibility to work with those students and moves it away from efforts at the whole school level, as the facilitators suggested. Similar implications of the different roles of teachers and welfare managers have been discussed by Edwards et al. (2010). This division of roles, as well as the importance of collaboration between specialists and teachers, has also been highlighted in other contexts such as Sweden, with a particular focus on the need for enhanced collaboration between mother tongue special support tutors and classroom teachers (Avery, 2016). However, as the OECD (2015b) highlights, there is a need to encouraging all teachers, not just specialists, to prepare themselves for diverse classrooms which include immigrant students. At the same time, in order to ensure that such schemes do indeed act as a mechanism for inclusion changes at the organisational level are needed (Ainscow, 2014; Opertti, Walker and Zhang, 2014).

Having said this, as we saw in the three participating schools, there were benefits for the participating students. It is interesting to note that according to OECD (2015a) the sense of belonging of first-generation immigrant students seems to be strong in the UK. However, the reasons as to why this is happening are not explored in detail. Therefore, it could be argued that these individual focused approaches, which are used in a number of schools across the UK, might facilitate this stronger sense of belonging. At the same time, it could be argued that such approaches facilitate “alternative and more positive ways of thinking about and knowing students” (Keddie:209) that can lead to more just practices. However, we want to draw attention here to the fact that, by themselves, they cannot be enough. Rather, they have to be embedded within whole school approaches in order to truly promote inclusive cultures.

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**Notes on contributors:**

**Kyriaki Messiou** is Associate Professor in Education at the University of Southampton. Her research interests focus on inclusive education, students’ voices, and participation and marginalisation in school contexts.

**Marta Cristina Azaola** is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Southampton. Her research interests focus on educational inequalities and social exclusion.

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