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Mentoring social work adjunct educators: A collaborative autoethnography provides a blueprint for support

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Abstract

Sessional academics are often employed on a part-time, contract basis as casual (e.g. adjunct) teaching staff. Internationally, universities benefit from the expertise and experience of these educational team members. However, there is a lack of research in the literature identifying how to support them. This article attempts to bridge this gap by presenting the mentoring (e.g. faculty development) experiences of three social work educators. Drawing from queer theory, we utilized collaborative autoethnography and inductive analysis resulting in three themes: (1) mentoring building blocks, (2) mentoring blueprint, and (3) mentoring strengths and challenges. Finally, broader implications are discussed.

Keywords

Ethnography, faculty, mentoring, qualitative research

Adjuncts, academics with short-term or casual contracts, play a crucial role in teaching social work students. Diverse terms are used to label part-time teaching team members such as sessionals, casuals, non-tenure-track, contingent or contract faculty. These temporary academic teaching staff are a part of the social work teaching environment in most international universities and in particular, Clark et al. (2011) notes, they have 'become an essential addition to social work programs in the

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United States' (p. 1012). Given most academics are employed on a part-time basis (Gelman et al., 2022) and many programs could not meet student needs with full-time faculty alone (Moore et al., 2021), adjunct mentoring warrants prioritization. Furthermore, investing in and enhancing adjunct teaching skills through mentoring has been shown to improve student learning (Truuvert, 2014). Respondents in the research by Clark et al. (2011: 1018) saw adjuncts as assets and 'faculty extenders', bringing program excitement and 'freshness', adding 'areas of expertise' not possessed by the current faculty. Findings indicated adjuncts would benefit from classroom management and university policy and training, which results in increased retention, faculty interactions, and access to university resources.

Often universities provide little support beyond a syllabus, textbook, and administration details (Arden, 1995). However, this undervaluing is not new; Klein and Weisman (2001) called for the increased nurturance of non-tenured academics over 20 years ago. The explanation for not backing adjuncts is often stated to be financial (Shobe et al., 2014), yet Crick et al. (2020) reveal that the satisfaction of adjuncts is 'paramount to university success' (p. 411). For this to happen, these part-time teaching members need support and recognition from the school/department, for essential 'orientation to and connection with' (Klein and Weisman, 2001: 82) faculty and broader university systems. Furthermore, Ling (2009) recommended 'time and funding for professional development in academic workloads' (p. 12) for both full- and part-time staff.

Adjunct academics provide an educational experience equal in value to those employed full-time (Ryan et al., 2013), offer experience within contemporary policy and practice, and bring an enthusiasm for teaching (Klein and Weisman, 2001). Adjuncts, however, have been scrutinized. For example, Cline (1993) noted concerns around adjuncts having limited teaching skills and Belcher et al. (2011) explored whether increasing adjunct staff numbers renders the curriculum less effective and coherent.

Social work recognizes the importance of shepherding new professionals into the ranks of their peers as demonstrated through field education, considered the hallmark of social work education (Turner et al., 2021). In addition, this bridging process has been explored in preparing PhD students for teaching in the academy (Lu et al., 2019), preparing early career professionals to transition into their roles as researchers (Turner and Crane, 2016), as well as accessing how environmental supports predict faculty satisfaction (Crick et al., 2020). The process can include the purposeful sharing of knowledge, skills, and experience in a supportive relationship known as mentoring (Damaskos and Gardner, 2015). Mentoring can take on many forms including the opportunity to shadow a senior educator or have one's teaching reviewed in a 360-style feedback model. This opportunity to practice and receive constructive feedback on teaching effectiveness helps early career academics synthesize best practices in the delivery of their content-rich experience and theoretical training (Wilson et al., 2002; Woodman and Parappilly, 2015). Given the success of these bridging efforts to support social work students into practice, as well as doctoral students and early career faculty to become educators, it would be prudent to establish a support system for adjuncts to maximize their teaching excellence.

The current study

While there is robust literature discussing the impact of part-time faculty on the overall academy, Clark et al. (2011) revealed that 'limited attention has been given to the significance for programs such as social work' (p. 1012). Furthermore, there is a void in the social work literature examining the mentoring supports identified as needed by adjuncts (Gelman et al., 2022). The authors acknowledge these gaps in the current literature and initiated this qualitative study to examine mentoring adjuncts within an Australian social work teaching team.

Teaching in a fourth year unit, Practice Skills, not only provided context for our experiences and perspectives, but also located us in the social work academy where the mentoring of adjuncts was being 'storied'. This was not a formal program and no workload allowance was provided for either mentor or mentee; all members volunteered for these additional collegial conversations. Turner saw this as an extension of his unit coordinator's role (e.g. full-time, ongoing academic in charge of overall subject and supervisor for tutors), preparing, refining, and delivering the course/unit and as a new faculty member his goal was to build an exceptional teaching team. He viewed this as an investment toward continued teaching from the adjuncts. In addition, while the mentoring was organic and primarily originating from the unit coordinator, of the two adjunct teaching staff/mentees, it was acknowledged the permanent ongoing academic (mentor) had the least experience within the Australian university system and Australian social work. Recognition of this fact allowed for the mentees to also step into the role of mentor and knowledge holder, sharing their expertise with the unit coordinator.

Our central argument is that adjuncts need more support. Explicitly providing a blueprint of a mentoring structure offers that support. This research attempts to bridge the gap in the social work higher education scholarship by critically examining the unique mentoring experiences of three social work educators in an effort to enhance the training and preparation of adjuncts. We aim to leverage our insider perspectives, highlighting what worked well, lessons learned, and offering suggestions for future education-mentoring teams to answer the question: what are the essential elements that create a positive mentoring experience for adjuncts engaged in a co-tutoring role with a more experienced, permanent educator?

Methods

Design

Approval was obtained from Western Sydney University's *Human Ethics Research Committee* (Ethics ID H13814) prior to starting this research. To provide a framework for our discussions, we drew from de Lauretis's (1991) queer theory, which moved us from the dominant discourse around unit coordinator and adjunct relationships to supporting what has been defined as a radical experience to disrupt, deconstruct, and disorder (Mule, 2016) the higher education hegemony. This aim of queer theory to problematize unquestioned procedures (Hall, 2003) underpins our research. Queer theory allowed us to approach our analysis of the 'normal' and acceptable understandings of traditional academic roles, identities, and definitions with an openness to consider alternative ways of relating and being. To 'queer' our positions was an exercise in interrogating hierarchical academic assumptions of the power within our relationships. We pushed against traditional binary divisions recognizing and honoring the fluidity of our roles as knowledge holders.

Furthermore, this supported our use of collaborative autoethnography, which is increasingly being used by social work academics (Chhetry et al., 2023) to bring 'the personal, the concrete, and an emphasis on storytelling to our scholarship' (Holman-Jones, 2016: 228). In autoethnographic research, we were both researchers and participants making ourselves visible in the process while acknowledging and valuing our subjectivity (Chang et al., 2013). Utilizing collaborative autoethnography as noted by Roy and Uekusa (2020), refocused our research gaze toward ourselves, turning our 'collective self-narratives, observations and experiences into rich qualitative data' (p. 385) as well as providing the benefit of researcher empowerment and resilience, which fit nicely within our mentoring goals. Manning and Adams (2015) described autoethnography as 'a research method that foregrounds the researcher's personal experience (auto) as it is embedded within, and informed

by, cultural identities and contexts (ethno) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (graphy)' (p. 188). Finally, our sample size of three participants/researchers fits within that of other collaborative autoethnographic research teams (Chang et al., 2013; Roy and Uekusa, 2020).

Participants/researchers

Round, Mentee 1. I am a casual employee and Caucasian Australian acknowledging my white privilege. I have taught for 4 years, teaching three to five units per semester, contracted as unit coordinator/tutor in the summer semester, and working full-time hours solely as an adjunct, teaching undergrad and postgrad units after a long-term social work career. In addition, I have been a Research Assistant and brought a thorough understanding of and rich experience with university systems.

Chhetry, Mentee 2. I am a casual employee. I am originally from Nepal, having relocated to Australia in 2016 as an international student. I began teaching three to four social work units per semester to BSW and MSW(Q) students after I completed my social work degree in 2018. I have been a researcher in several research projects including enhancing social work pedagogy and mental health issues in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Turner, Mentor. I am a permanent/ongoing employee and was the unit coordinator. I am a Caucasian male originally from the United States. In addition to my MSW, and MEd, I have earned a doctorate focusing on teaching pedagogy and curriculum development. I am aware of both my privilege as a full-time academic and my outsider status as a non-Australian.

Data collection

Data were collected from weekly written reflections, and group discussion. Over 11 teaching weeks, the team kept individual reflective logs related to co-teaching experiences as mentor/mentees. The weekly logs prompted reflections in the following five areas: (1) teaching insights/struggles, (2) mentor feedback, (3) critical thinking, (4) new skills learned, and (5) miscellaneous. These were discussed in fortnightly Zoom conversations. During a further seven Zoom meetings, held once the semester ended, the co-authors used the five areas as prompts, for reflective and reflexive sharing of personal experiences and perspectives. Turner captured quotes and clarifications during the group discussion. The written logs, as well as notes taken during the recorded Zoom meetings, comprised the data sources for this inquiry.

Analysis

Thematic analysis and concept mapping helped us organize and analyze the data as well as define themes and subthemes. Turner and Chhetry followed the line-by-line coding method in Phase 1, generating initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Several rounds of qualitative analysis were conducted to identify the defined themes according to conceptual similarities, which were refined to subthemes in Phase 2. The first stage of analysis involved Turner and Chhetry identifying the most relevant themes during four Zoom meetings that resulted in two additional stages of qualitative analysis – open coding and thematic analysis. Round provided further review to the preliminary analysis. Utilizing an autoethnographic research framework ensured the reflexive practice of self-awareness was undertaken when re-examining themes and subthemes (Anderson, 2006), which offered new insights.

Findings – thematic analysis

Through a process of sensemaking embedded in the constructivist and interpretivist epistemology of autoethnography, we have curated three themes from an inductive analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 2014) providing a framework for subthemes: (1) mentoring building blocks, (2) mentoring blueprint: adjunct development, and (3) mentoring strengths and challenges. In this section, results of a cross-case thematic analysis are highlighted. Themes and subthemes are introduced with direct quotes from the reflective logs, providing researchers' voice. We explore how these themes manifested in our teaching and how they are interconnected.

Theme 1: Mentoring building blocks

All plans have fundamental elements, building blocks, that make a successful design.

Our mentoring experience resulted in outcomes that are essential components for future social work mentoring programs. The authors defined these eight subthemes as the key ingredients needed to ensure successful mentoring of adjuncts.

Accessibility. Mentor accessibility was established as a foundational value by the mentor actively soliciting feedback within regular meetings. The first time a mentee provided feedback and the mentor actively brought these suggestions into the group relationship it was acknowledged as a turning-point for the group. Seeing mentee feedback actioned took the discussion from a lofty academic goal to a real-time practical change in the relationship. Another significant moment was when Turner apologized to Round for an email misunderstanding. She shared, 'That sets a really good tone and keeps communication open'. Having open bi-directional communication supported the view that Turner was accessible; they were open to Rounds input.

Collegiality. Collegiality emerged as another subtheme. The collegial connection between the educators was enriched through cross-tutor learning, relationship building, academic discourse, and networking around future teaching opportunities. Chhetry stated that her relationship with Round was instrumental in securing a teaching position the following semester. All authors agreed that collegiality resulted in a stronger teaching and research team. Chhetry offered,

> working with Turner was different. There were opportunities from the very beginning to have open conversations in the team to reflect on our teaching styles and constantly review the unit contents. This was very new to me. The best part . . . was having the chance to communicate with the team on a regular basis.

Confidence enhancement. Tutors, Round and Chhetry, were provided standing roles within the tutorials, such as delivering the weekly Acknowledgment of Country. Recognizing that the mentees had differing teaching experience and skill, customized opportunities were facilitated for each mentee to stretch their teaching wings. Round noted 'being encouraged and trusted by Turner' was crucial. Team processing provided individualized growth moments, as demonstrated by Chhetry: 'I am keen to develop the skills to be authentic. Even though I have realized that I need to develop skills to frame my experiences, I am afraid that students might judge me'. This reflection enabled the team to process what it means for instructors to model appropriate vulnerability in class and how that translates to student social workers being vulnerable for clients.

Sense of empowerment. Mentees had experienced a variety of definitions of adjunct teaching teams and roles, as each unit coordinator adopts their own style. Chhetry pointed out, '. . . the most common thing was the hierarchical approach embedded in the system where adjuncts are assigned to do certain tasks . . .'. Both mentees agreed that the notion of empowerment or being able to directly make contributions was significant. This took a variety of forms as noted by Chhetry: 'Seeing Round challenge Turner made me comfortable to share my ideas and feedback on unit content and learning materials'. In addition, mentees shared that being granted 'instructor' access to the university online learning portal imparted a sense of equity as it is equivalent to the role of unit coordinator. Chhetry shared, 'It gives me a sense of empowerment to be able to make changes in [the learning portal] site that eases the process of teaching'.

Power awareness. The teaching team openly discussed their awareness of team power dynamics and maintained a commitment to minimize differences throughout the semester. Examples included simply sharing PowerPoint slides prior to tutorials and soliciting edits, inviting tutors to integrate their own teaching material/activities, and offering tutors the opportunity to develop and upload quiz questions into the online system. Chhetry reflected, 'I was not used to giving feedback to unit coordinators. I have not done it in the past, but it has been different when working with Turner'. However, Turner reflected, 'hierarchies in some ways are easier to disseminate marching orders. A team requires direction. It requires time to get on the same page!'

Solidarity. The authors agreed that solidarity was seen as a team concern for one another and strengthened the team relationships. Turner noted, 'Round expressed concern when I was visibly ill during the early stages of the COVID pandemic. Her inquiry about my health was experienced as a heartfelt and meaningful gesture, one that transcended professional courtesy'. This collective awareness was extended to our students, as Turner reflected, 'COVID-19 exacerbates everyone's stress; if instructors have a short fuse so do students. We are not taking care of ourselves'. As a result, we created avenues to routinely check-in with each other, as well as with students during tutorials.

Customized support. Mentees have individual strengths and experiences requiring different input and support from a mentor. Turner recognized differences between the teaching abilities of co-tutors and was open in communicating about both their strengths and limitations. This enabled him to provide support in varied ways and at different levels to the mentees, who also had different working styles. For example, Turner noted,

> I was grateful for Round's teaching confidence and experience and the ability to seamlessly jump into a co-teaching role. We very quickly were able to play off one another. Chhetry was an eager learner and took on numerous roles that enhanced the overall teaching experience.

Bonding. The teaching team noted the importance of bringing the personal into their professional relationship. These 'fun' or less structured moments helped facilitate a more friendly spirit and humanized our relationships. This included Turner and Round joking about the differences in meaning of American and Australian words, as well as seeing Chhetry's nieces waving to team members during Zoom meetings. These glimpses into the personal lives of the teaching team strengthened the team bond. Round commented,

> The team connection with Turner and Chhetry was one of the highlights. I appreciated the friendship and camaraderie we shared, particularly because adjuncts are not part of faculty meetings and there was suddenly even less contact [with colleagues] due to Covid-19.

Theme 2: Adjunct educator development: A mentoring blueprint

Adjunct development was seen as a mentoring blueprint; a plan or direction in assisting part-time teaching staff to increase their potential for full-time employment. Mentorship was seen as crucial to nurturing advanced teaching skills, expanding practice skills, and opening new avenues for mentees to engage in research. Three subthemes were illuminated.

Teaching reflection. Individual and team reflections enabled us to work through: 'what would we do differently?' This critical evaluation of better teaching strategies to achieve the desired outcomes was viewed as an essential teaching skill that helped mentees improve themselves as social work educators. The tutors had opportunity to apply new teaching techniques that was rewarding as well as challenging. Round shared her struggle when trialing a new activity in an online class space, 'I tried to initiate a quick live quiz-type activity in tutorial five, which showed that unfortunately I had not thought through every aspect when presenting it on Zoom!' This created an opportunity to process alternate approaches, with all team members learning from the one experience. Furthermore, mentees were afforded the opportunity to engage in pedagogical discourse in a safe learning environment, as seen in Chhetry's reflective comment,

> I will focus on the teacher-student relationship . . . in my future classes to instill more motivation among students . . . and be open-minded in discussions . . . I am becoming more conscious of my own learning process in terms of delivering teaching materials and the meaningfulness of my role not only as a tutor but also as a caretaker and cheerleader.

Practice reflection. Practice reflection was defined as the expansion of social work concepts to advance student social work practice skills through classroom teaching. Mentee practice skills were developed as they were exposed to new practice learning. Round appreciated exposure to a variety of new assessment tools, while Chhetry found some new topics challenging, such as taking a client's sexual history or addressing client's sexual health concerns as part of a treatment plan. Having access to a mentoring space that welcomed honest reflection and discussion was appreciated by mentees.

One such discussion was: if social work engages in difficult and socially taboo topics such as homelessness, drug use, domestic violence, why should we not also be prepared to discuss sexuality as part of our practice? Chhetry reflected on the lack of sexuality content in her social work educational experience and highlighted,

> This learning has been rewarding to me not only in terms of allowing me to open up conversations on sexuality with social work students . . . and helping them to be equipped with practice skills to talk about sexuality with their clients, but has increased my interest in exploring this further . . . within social work practice.

Research reflection. Undertaking research about mentoring and teaching as a team was a unique process identified as a highlight by all members. Mentees saw it as particularly helpful to enhance experience and potentially enable future research opportunities. Mentoring provided a platform on which to hone research skills such as conducting literature reviews, data collection, analysis,

coding, and overall, doing real-time research. Both mentees shared that collaborating on the research project and co-authoring a manuscript with a mentor and co-worker was a worthwhile learning experience, essential for future advancement.

Theme 3: Mentoring strengths and challenges

The mentoring process had positive aspects plus some that were difficult or draining. Reflective sessions not only illuminated learning opportunities from teaching styles and practice content, but also resulted in critically reviewing the current university system of recruiting adjuncts, specifically examining barriers for career promotion in teaching and research. Two subthemes were noted: mentoring (1) strengths and (2) challenges. In addition to previous positive attributes listed, the authors noted the following strengths.

Strengths. The authors commented that having a co-teaching team versus a cohort of siloed tutors as promulgated in the current system, provided real-time group evaluation of unit assignment effectiveness. Fortnightly meetings facilitated timely group feedback that is typically not available with tutors operating alone in their marking duties. Additional strengths were noted by Turner:

> Chhetry took it upon herself to take notes [during tutorial lessons] for students, highlighting items via Zoom chat function. She was able to prompt latecomers, chat with students having special requests or needing to share private concerns. International students appreciated sharing the summary from lecture and classroom discussion. Further, I appreciated Round's knowledge of the university's systems and ability to mentor me throughout much of my process as a new faculty member. Even before the mentoring project started, I met with Round a few times via Zoom to seek her wisdom about coordinator/adjunct roles within the university.

Challenges. Mentees noted unexpected challenges such as new learning that they faced. At times, Round struggled with her teaching role noting a shift with her partnership with MENTOR. She shared,

> Normally I bring the energy and laughs, however, I discovered that Turner was more than a match in both! As a result, I found I took on a more administrative-type role, which I did not enjoy as much, and which some students commented that they did not enjoy as much. Discovering our different communication styles provided a slight challenge, however, learning how to incorporate that knowledge resulted in greater understanding and depth of connection. A second challenge was the reality of the power dynamic that naturally exists between mentor/mentees and coordinator/adjuncts. We were committed to disrupt and 'break' it, yet it was not always easy.

Time for team building directly affected other specific challenges meriting mention, such as cultural nuances. Chhetry noted,

> Being a non-white person in the team was a bit challenging. Now, when I reflect, I realise that this might have stopped me from opening-up in some of the conversations due to in part my own internalized racism or deeply engrained cultural acceptance and understanding of white superiority. However, now it is very different from when we started; I feel more comfortable to share my personal views and understandings in the team.

While the mentoring model held many benefits, it posed a new way of interacting that presented challenges for not only mentees but for mentor as well. Turner noted, for example, that it is a challenge to allow space for the unit coordinator to be in a learning role while leading the team as defined by the university system. He shared,

> While I recognized my role as the unit coordinator, thus my administrative responsibilities and hierarchical position, I also recognized my outsider status as an American new to Australian social work and this university system. I wanted to create an atmosphere where the mentee's areas of expertise and skill sets could be recognized. Further, I wanted to instill collegiality where cross-mentoring was encouraged, and I could also benefit from their knowledge and expertise. However, it felt as if Round occasionally found it difficult to mentor me, defaulting to the expectation that a person in my position would already know certain aspects of the job. Additionally, as part of her mentoring, she questioned being asked to take on certain tasks, asserting that in her experience the task was in the realm of unit coordinator [for which adjuncts are not paid]. There was a definite un-learning and re-learning curve for us.

Discussion

This research explored a mentoring relationship between three Australian social work educators. The findings highlighted key mentoring attributes appreciated by adjuncts as well as noting how the current system could more effectively support these teaching colleagues in their educator role. This article contributes to the scholarship and expands upon Simmons et al.'s (2020: 13) work examining 'the experiences and needs of . . . faculty who [do not] have the protection of tenure' ensuring 'equity and fairness' for adjuncts specifically.

A mentoring blueprint: Describing the architectural building blocks

It was in this process of unpacking and critically scrutinizing our teaching relationship, that queer theory facilitated an examination of how social work education can be enhanced by mentoring (Mule, 2016). For example, while acknowledging our hierarchical relationships, we attempted to minimize this in our mentoring through a model of passing of the baton, where a member who was a knowledge holder was able to mentor the others. Viewing 'mentor and mentee as partners in [the] mentoring relationship' (Maramaldi et al., 2004: 92–93) fostered intentional, nuanced micro-mentoring moments, which allowed the team to efficiently disseminate knowledge, increase competency and enhance the unit. These were not static positions; rather, we endeavored to cultivate an environment of cross-learning and cross-mentoring; we approached this from a stance of 'everyone leads, everyone learns' (Satterly et al., 2018: 441). Queer theory allowed us to examine the traditional role of unit coordinator and adjunct creating what Holman-Jones (2016) refers to as 'narratives that demonstrate the constraints of narrowly defining which relationships count as "meaningful" and the possibilities and freedoms that can be achieved by reconceiving – by queering – our ideas about what and how relationships matter' (p. 233).

Perhaps, most compelling were the results for theme 1, *Mentoring Building Blocks*. The authors found that mentoring resulted in positive outcomes in the teaching experience. We have identified eight critical building blocks outside of the act of teaching that bolster adjunct teaching success. This finding lends itself to an argument that the current system of throwing adjuncts into the teaching fire is not only remiss but a huge missed opportunity to build a quality teaching cohort.

Building a teaching team is often elusive in the typical university practice of a unit coordinator/tutor hierarchy, as highlighted in theme 1: *Mentoring Building Blocks* – power awareness. A unit

coordinator plays a vital role in finding a balance through strategies such as involving adjuncts in weekly class preparation, encouraging participation during tutorial discussions/activities, and modeling equality within the team. Perhaps, most important was a sense of solidarity within a teaching team. Solidarity among team members was demonstrated as Turner openly discussed with both adjuncts when misogyny was at play by male students seemingly attempting to bond with Turner rather than communicating directly with the female tutors.

Recommendations for future teams, mentors, and the university

The findings highlighted the importance of investing in adjunct teaching staff, specifically enhancing their teaching, practice, and research skills (theme 2: *Adjunct Educator Development*). And while it is not a novel practice that the casualization of the academy is due to financial considerations (Arden, 1995), we risk the integrity of our programs if we do not have some means in place to funnel these savings back into investing in the adjunct pool of instructors. Mentoring may be the answer. Scholars (Shobe et al., 2014) have noted that 'mentoring is widely embraced by the social work profession' (p. 447), however, as little as 25% of adjuncts were offered development opportunities (Ryan et al., 2013) and up to 40% in only some institutions (May et al., 2013). Our teaching team discussed that a focus on investing in adjuncts, for example, providing opportunities in designing assessment quiz questions, not only involved adjuncts in the creation of teaching content but helped familiarize them with the content in a way that merely reading the unit coordinator's provided PowerPoint would not have delivered. Furthermore, framing the relationship with an eye to expanding their skill sets, such as utilizing the online portal to learn how to set up quizzes, bolstered their curricula vitae for future tutor/unit coordinator opportunities. In addition, our research has implications for international social work education. Building on prior scholarship (Glass et al., 2021; Johannessen, 2016) around international mentoring within higher education, this research expands the discourse into social work. If social work education hopes to continue to be globally relevant, it must support and mentor educators, but in particular adjuncts, worldwide in an effort to maximize the highest quality student learning.

Lessons learned

A key finding for theme 3: *Mentoring Strengths and Challenges* notes that along with the strengths, challenges did occur. Mentees expressed a range of challenges including the lack of access to permanent physical desk/office space, teaching resources, support to develop a research profile, and most importantly minimal or no opportunity to deepen teamwork. Furthermore, only having 3 hours allocated per semester for 'other academic duties' such as marking meetings, was discussed. It is important to note that adjuncts are not required or paid to attend school meetings. This is problematic in that it prevents adjuncts from benefiting from organic mentoring such as sharing of information, building broader collegial supports, and developing an identity as a valued team member of the university.

More importantly, a diverse and rich landscape of learning was illuminated that included (1) decolonizing mentoring, (2) personal reflection, and (3) possibilities and potential. For example, it was not until processing the experience that it was brought to the surface that there were missed opportunities to explore the embedded impact of white privilege on Chhetry's status as person of Nepalese descent. Lessons learned include the following:

1. *Decolonizing mentoring*: A key aspect of autoethnography is to examine personal narratives in ways that also illuminate the inter-personal, institutional, and ultimately structural dimensions of power, empowerment, and disempowerment with all the complexities of

intersectionality that this involves. Individual narratives tell bigger stories about privilege and power. Bringing these individual conversations back into a collective discourse around establishing more equitable mentor–mentee relationships is a key take-away from this research. Queer theory questions the societal status quo prompting social work to critically examine the status quo regarding adjunct mentoring or lack of mentoring within our educational hallways. Examining non-traditional hierarchical mentoring models and their application within social work is essential particularly as we address institutional and departmental structures of white privilege. There is value in a 'collaborative . . . give and take process' (Crane et al., 2009: 27) enhancing the mentoring experience. However, the experience must acknowledge power differentials and have an explicit plan of action to ensure all participants have equitable opportunities for contributions, decision-making, and voicing concerns. This oversight is viewed as a priority for discussion in the team's future teaching partnerships.

2. *Personal reflection*: It is crucial to note that despite good intentions of the team, the full nature of our power relationships was obscured. This is particularly acute given the social work profession is vigorously attempting to decolonize social work education and practice as a part of contemporary praxis. Not thoroughly identifying and addressing limitations and critiques can undermine research validity and, therefore, affect findings (Le Roux, 2017). We were challenged to dismantle our implicit colonial gaze by diving deeper into the autoethnographic process in an effort to identify our own positionality as researchers and our personal meaning-making of the mentoring experience. In particular, we continue to revisit our white privilege, seeking transformative moments as this relates to the academy and the larger societal issues around oppression (Starr, 2010).
3. *Possibilities and potential*: Another key extracted gem was transformational opportunities that were illuminated regarding power, oppression, and research relations within our mentor–mentee dyad. Queer theory provided us a theoretical perspective allowing us to question traditionally held beliefs around mentoring and more importantly, it provided an approach to disrupt the inherent white privilege within our relationship. Furthermore, queer theory reminds us that the mentor–mentee relationship is more than an individual experience but one that is interpersonal and systemic. This acknowledgment prompts us as we go into research partnerships to ask (a) who owns the expertise, (b) how is space created to share expertise, (c) is there a process to re-center equity if the team strays toward more colonial oppressive practices? Considering these questions prior to research partnerships as well as revisiting them throughout the research relationship is salient for our profession's growth and critical to decolonizing research methods, literature, and academia.

We believe implementing these lessons learned will help address social work's concern with white privilege and move toward anti-oppressive frameworks. Queer theory allowed us 'to feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (Muñoz, 2009: 1). Queer theory provided a lens to view power, to work on undoing hierarchies and to fight against social inequalities, to critique 'structural forms of domination, especially those forms of oppression that appear to be normal or natural' (Grzanka, 2019: 2). It is a tool for countering current norms, a tool for envisioning possible realities for marginalized communities, for dispensing with division and oppressive binaries such as mentor/mentee, and a tool ideally sparking change, progress, and a promise of transformative action.

Structural barriers

Mentoring is time-consuming; if done well, it requires extensive skill and commitment by faculty. Furthermore, it is usually unpaid and underappreciated. Institutions of higher education and, more

specifically, social work programs, should not only center academic contributions which often go unnoticed or unrecognized by a neoliberal institution, but explicitly work to dismantle the structural employment inequities faced by adjuncts. Structural barriers such as the marketization of higher education (Goldingay et al., 2017) must be scrutinized and addressed. Universities must invest in a work culture that increases participation of adjuncts, while recognizing potential other employment commitments, as well as their personal life responsibilities that may bar full or active participation. Furthermore, full-time faculty mentors can play an essential power broker role in advancing the curriculum through input from casual academics. Other suggestions include the following:

1. *University supported funding for further research*: Research needs to examine the themes with a larger sample size of adjuncts to elaborate on findings and help work groups or departments bolster mentoring relationships in light of systemic barriers.
2. *University workload allocation to include unit coordinator mentoring*: Dedicated unit coordinator hours should be allocated to help adjuncts identify a new skill they want to learn regarding running the unit (i.e. technology use, use of teaching platform).
3. *School/departmental policy should support a collegial teaching team*: Establish explicit mentoring relationships where adjuncts feel supported and valued, differentiating the mentoring options for adjuncts who are new versus seasoned educators.
4. *School/departmental sponsored luncheon/stipend*: If there is a formal end-of-the-year gathering, adjuncts should be not only invited but paid. Provide an end-of-the-year recognition lunch/dinner for adjuncts hosted by the full-time faculty.
5. *School/departmental adjunct virtual space*: Create a virtual space for adjuncts to gather for peer support, reflect on their teaching, share teaching ideas/concerns, and foster collegial connection to the school/department.
6. *School/departmental adjunct invitation extension*: Extend invitations to informal faculty social events (i.e. birthday lunches, etc.) to adjuncts.
7. *School/departmental web presence*: Allocate a spot on the school website for adjuncts.
8. *School/departmental additional administrative contract hours*: Allocate additional hours to teaching contracts for regular unit meetings with other adjuncts and/or one-on-one with the unit coordinator especially around marking, student concerns, and unit questions.
9. *School/departmental offer of research track*: Identify those adjunct teaching staff interested in enhancing their research profile noting current research skill sets and/or skills that they want to learn. Visibly market this cohort to faculty conducting research and needing research assistants.
10. *School/departmental mentoring track*: Facilitate mentoring of new adjuncts by rewarding and incentivizing this role within the permanent teaching academics. This might include release time as well as formalized documentation of this contribution for the purpose of promotion and tenure. In addition, fulfilling these additional responsibilities in their role should be supported in adjunct development.

Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and no interventions took place. The sample size relied on the experience of only three authors who had an interest in mentoring. The mentor and one of the mentees identified as white thus a more diverse sample could lead to richer findings. Furthermore, both mentees were employed as tutors by the unit coordinator, and while attempts were made to

mitigate the influence of social desirability, peer pressure, and response bias, it is difficult to know the extent or the impact of any of these on the tutors (aka mentees, adjuncts, co-authors).

Conclusion

Our findings highlighted that mentoring results in positive outcomes in the teaching experience of adjuncts, with a sense of solidarity as crucial to the experience. Globally institutions of higher education and specifically social work programs must make a more explicit effort to support adjuncts. Social work departments with their grounding in social justice should be taking the lead in this call to action. One step toward tackling the challenges of casualization is to address the mentoring needs of adjuncts, a valuable teaching resource, to ensure their stable employment, career advancement opportunities and a sense of community within higher education. This research, while focused in Australia, offers solutions applicable to bridge the needs of adjuncts within international social work programs. Ultimately, mentoring is a step toward robustly conveying that social work values these part-time academics as essential to providing quality learning spaces for students.

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