Perceptions of Peer Tutoring at a University in Chile

Percepciones de la tutoría de compañeros en una Universidad en Chile

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Abstract

The purpose of this Action Research study is to explore students' perceptions of their experience in an Academic Support Program* (ASP) implemented in a Chilean university to align students' lack of competencies to the minimum required to be able to succeed. Focus groups were held with 21 participants who revealed that the ASP increased their self-confidence and academic achievement. However, students' level of awareness regarding the benefits of the ASP needs to be improved to promote their participation. The findings will generate an action plan to improve students' learning outcomes and well-being.

Key words

Peer tutoring; higher education; dropouts; tutoring; academic achievement; student welfare

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio de investigación-acción es explorar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre su experiencia en un ASP* implementado en una universidad chilena para alinear la falta de competencias de los estudiantes con el mínimo requerido para lograr buenos resultados. Se hicieron grupos de sondeo [focus group] con 21 participantes que revelaron que los ASP aumentaron la confianza en sí mismos y el logro académico. Sin embargo, hay que mejorar el nivel de consciencia del estudiante sobre los beneficios del ASP para promover su participación. Los hallazgos generarán un plan de acción para mejorar los resultados y el bienestar de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave

Enseñanza mutua; enseñanza superior; alumno desertor; tutoría; rendimiento escolar; bienestar del estudiante

* Academic Support Program / Programa de apoyo académico, sigla en inglés.

**Descripción del artículo |
Article description**

It is a qualitative action research study that explores university students' perceptions of their experience in an academic support programme. The investigation, result of the project *The Effectiveness of an Academic Support Programme at a University in Chile*, draws from an Appreciative Inquiry qualitative approach which relies on the social aspects of research and collaborative discovery. The study seeks to generate an action plan to improve students' learning outcomes and provide them with meaningful educational experiences.

Introduction

There is a tendency in Higher Education institutions to focus on course attrition rates. Some students' levels of learning skills might be low because the knowledge that they have about learning strategies also might be scarce (Fredrickson, 2000). Exploring students' obstacles might be an effective way to detect those who need help (Ishikura, 2015). In addition, identifying students' learning difficulties might allow teachers to understand how to support learners (Keller-Margulis, McQuillin, Castañeda, Ochs & Jones, 2018).

Collecting reliable data on time can assist leaders in their decision-making processes and allow them to strategically review the educational procedures to adjust their direction and minimize students' academic risks (Donoghue, 2007; Longden & Yorke, 2009). Thus, the present article focuses on the analysis of tutors' and tutees' real experiences at a peer tutoring program called Academic Support Program (ASP). It is offered by the Faculty of Education at a large and private university in Chile and aims to assist students in academic disadvantage. The objective of the study is to search for pedagogical practices that can boost and promote higher expectations in both groups, tutors and tutees (Giles & Alderson, 2008), and can enlighten new strategic ways of enhancing academic results.

Peer tutoring is an effective strategy that fosters learning in inclusive and collaborative environments (AbdulRaheem, Yusuf & Odutayo, 2017; Alzahrani & Leko, 2018). It is known as a dyadic and social learning process between tutees and tutors in which interpersonal relationships grow (Jacobi, 1991; McDowall-Long, 2004). Peer tutoring involves learning interactions between tutors and tutees (Bertin & Narcy-Combes, 2007) in collaborative and friendly environments where everyone understands each other's worries and interests (Gerhart, 2012).

Many researchers have focused on the analysis of peer learning networks, tutors' and tutees' perceptions of tutoring models, and principles of effective mentoring programmes. For instance, Miquel and Duran (2017) evaluated the influence of peer learning networks and concluded that it is a way to enhance cooperative learning. Jenkinson and Amanda Benson (2016), as well as Kalpazidou Schmidt and Faber (2016), explored the impact of a mentoring program on students' learning outcomes and argued that it is the pathway to develop teaching experience. Other researchers have conducted studies to explore the benefits of peer and teacher tutoring in Higher Education. For instance, Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes, and Mellis (2016), claimed that peer tutoring provides a valuable learning experience for junior students, different to the traditional teaching by teachers, and an opportunity for senior students to improve their teaching skills. Stigmar (2016) analyzed thirty studies related to peer tutoring and discovered that it increases the development of students' generic skills.

Worley and Naresh (2014) analyzed the impact of a peer tutoring program implemented in middle schools in Ohio, USA. The authors discovered that tutees and tutors gained from each other's learning experiences and became responsible for their learning. Paloyo, Rogan, and Siminski (2016), evaluated the impact of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) at an Australian university. They found that PASS enhanced students' grades and fostered their adaptation process to college. Ragonis and Hazzan (2009) explored the pedagogical contributions of a disciplinary-focused peer tutoring model at an Institute of Technology in Israel. The authors concluded that the program's success depended on the development of tutors' communication strategies and teaching skills.

In the case of Latin America, there are also studies related to peer tutoring. For example, Lemus-Ortiz, Torres-Jiménez, Serrano-Trejo and Gúzman-Bárcenas (2015), designed a peer tutoring program to promote self and peer evaluation as a learning strategy to impact students' academic development at the National Polytechnic Institute, in Mexico. They concluded that meaningful learning occurs when students know in advance what the learning objectives are, how they will be assessed, and what outcomes they are expected to reach. Finally, Chois-Lenis, Casas-Bustillo, López-Higuera, Prado-Mosquera, and Cajas-Paz (2017), explored participants' perceptions of peer tutorials in Colombia. They discovered that peer tutorials were valuable tools that fostered learning, social integration to college, and an opportunity for lifelong learning.

The aforementioned characteristics of peer tutoring support not only cognitive but also affective factors related to individuals' learning processes (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Schaffer, Wile & Griggs, 1990). For instance, when students work together, they share knowledge and collaborative learning experiences that promote safe learning environments and generate learning communities of peers (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016). Consequently, tutees perceive an environment free of criticism through immediate constructive peer feedback and modelling (Topping, 1996). It is not only tutees benefiting from peer tutoring but also tutors, because they learn while they teach (Stigmar, 2016). Tutors have to make an effort when reviewing pre-existing knowledge, which is precisely when new associations and integration of concepts take place in their brains (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Topping, 1996). Finally, tutoring reduces "the gap between education and professional practice" (Gerhart, 2012, p. 51).

The current Action Research study applied the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) qualitative, and interpretative approach (Giles & Alderson, 2008) based on a "social world created and co-constructed in dialogue" (Kung, Giles & Hagan, 2013, p. 29). The literature on AI reveals that participants engage in dialogues, share experiences, and explore their assumptions collaboratively (Goldberg, 2001; Yballe & O'Connor, 2000). The AI approach engages people to think about the future envisioning better actions based on positive past experiences (Heslop, Stojanovski, Paul & Bailey, 2018). The current article's appreciative process began during the inquiry of tutors' and tutees' past and present experiences related to their participation in the Academic Support Program (ASP). The research engaged participants in the creation of provocative propositions to promote new ideas and new possibilities to guide transformational change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

Great Philosophers agreed that people do not perceive the world directly, but they perceive the contents of one's own mind (Renani, 2018; Searle, 2015). Thomas Reid (as cited in Yolton, 1975, p. 145) stated that the immediate objects of perception are the shadows of external objects. Other Philosophers have claimed that it takes the experience to associate the look of the object with the feel of its shape (Berkeley, 1709; Jessop, 1964; Locke, 1690). Moreover, perception is the mental state that has an object; it involves the conception of the object and an irresistible belief in its present existence (Reid, 1790). Searle (2015) argued that perception is causally self-referential and that the causal relation is an experienced condition. For example, the conditions of satisfaction require reference to experience itself. Consequently, when individuals engage in action or perceive an activity, they experience something that causes perceptual experiences in them. The purpose of the current research is to learn about tutees' and tutors' perceptions of their experiences, within the ASP using

face-to-face focus group interviews and the AI approach, which will inform the analysis. Finally, the study will present the results of the effectiveness of the ASP as a strategic institutional response to students at academic risk (Harvey & Kosman, 2014).

Background

There is a need to improve retention and completion rates in Higher Education in Chile (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2015). Thus, in 2017, the Chilean Government requested universities to apply diagnostic tests to measure students' entry skills and to plan actions to support those in academic risk (Chile, Ministerio de Educación, 2016). In addition, many educational researchers have focused their attention on learning about those programmes that seek to support students at risk. For example, Cabrera-Murcia (2017) conducted a study at a public university in Chile to explore the teaching strategies tutors applied to promote active learning among peers. The findings revealed that the key to any successful learning experience was for tutors to learn from the tutees' feedback to plan actions accordingly. Another study focused on learning about the influence of a tutoring program at a private university in Chile. The findings revealed that students who participated accomplished better academic results in their core classes than those who did not (Jiménez, Acuña, Quiero, López & Zahn, 2015).

More than 80% of the students that enroll at the university where the present study took place belong to a low socio-economic stratum and come with inadequate academic preparation from schools. As the quality of schooling is strongly correlated with higher private returns (Pritchett, 2006), students with low-income backgrounds are in a disadvantaged position in comparison with those from families with the greatest income and a high cultural capital. For example, there are significant differences in academic performances between the latter and students from a low socio-economic stratum (OECD, 2015). Moreover, there is a relation between parental education and students' academic achievement (Frenette, 2007). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that students' test scores increase when raising the number of books at home (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011), which is the most relevant predictor of students' performance in most countries (Woessmann, 2004). It also reflects their family socio-economic background (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011) and it determines their future lives. Unfortunately, there are still income inequalities across the different socio-economic groups in Chile and low inter-generational social mobility (OECD, 2015), which impacts the level of their cultural capital (Espinoza & González Fiegehen, 2013).

The aforenamed findings are indicators that can evidence the reason why many university students undergo different challenges during their college experience. However, adapting institutional practice in order to find ways to support students at risk of failing courses has been a challenge for Higher Education Institutions (Tinto, 2006). For the past three years, the role of the Faculty of Education where the study took place has been vital in helping students at academic risk. One of the major worries has been to find ways to align students' poor skills to the minimum required and to support them through this process. Therefore, since 2015, the ASP has been implemented at the Faculty of Education. It is an 11-weeks peer tutoring programme offered every semester and students

who fail any test within the first five weeks of each semester are encouraged to attend.

The ASP aims to assist students at risk and prevent them from failing a course or withdrawing from it. The objective is to increase their chances of academic success and to help them find joy throughout their academic life. In order for this to happen, it is essential to carry out specific actions. For example, it becomes necessary to implement formal follow-up strategies that allow the identification of those students in academic need in the early phases of their degree programmes. Moreover, monitoring students' learning process and analyzing their outcomes are actions that need to be taken. Finally, it is vital to implement approaches that support students at risk based on effective teaching methodologies.

Students at this program receive support in those core classes that have historically presented a challenge and where the percentage of passing grades has been low. The most relevant aspect of the tutoring is that the tutors are senior students who have successfully passed those classes. They share contributions to the learning environment and are regarded as less intimidating and more approachable than teachers.

The ASP values peer tutoring as an "interactive method of teaching and learning" (Topping, 1996, p. 338) where a more experienced student becomes the tutor of those less experienced. The program encourages peer learning networks based on cooperative learning environments that develop mutual respect and trust to meet the needs of the instructed tutees (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Miquel & Duran, 2017; Ragonis & Hazzan, 2009).

Finally, there is a formal selection process by a specialized team of faculty members of the pedagogical programmes. The most relevant requirements relate to candidates' levels of commitment and active engagement to students in academic risk. Besides, senior students should be able to foster collaborative interactions in safe environments. Also, they need to possess a vast knowledge of the core classes involved in the tutorials to support tutees to develop the necessary skills they need to succeed. Finally, they are required to reach an average grade of 6.0 on a 1.0 - 7.0 scale.

Characteristics of the Academic Support Program (ASP)

The ASP is aimed at supporting students who belong to the pedagogical programmes at the Faculty of Education and whose grades are between 2.0 to 3.9 on a scale from 1.0 to 7.0 in the core courses during the first five weeks of classes. Tutors are advanced students guiding and helping those who have not acquired the required knowledge (McDowall-Long, 2004; Reichenberg, Avissar & Sagee, 2015; Stigmar, 2016). Tutorials involve four hours of teaching per week to a maximum of 10 students throughout 11 weeks. The sessions enhance a sense of community and learning experiences that take place in small classrooms. It is an alternative teaching and learning approach based on students' learning difficulties connected to the topics covered in the core courses' syllabus. The objective is to clarify specific contents and to aid students' understanding, to develop learning skills, and to improve learning strategies. Besides, the tutorials aim to foster active, interactive, and participative learning. Thus, tutees are prompt to work together as a team finding solutions to academic challenges and tutors provide constant and constructive feedback.

Tutors and the teachers of the core classes meet every week to work collaboratively, to exchange teaching strategies and educational materials, and to share information related to tutees' learning difficulties and cases of low achievement levels. Finally, tutors receive a certificate issued by the Faculty of Education. However, the most important incentive for them is related to academic, professional, and personal growth (Kalpazidou-Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Reichenberg, Avissar & Sagee, 2015). In the case of tutees, those who actively participate in the peer tutoring sessions receive extra credits in the core classes.

Methodology

The study seeks to generate knowledge collaboratively following an Action Research cycle that "builds on the past and takes place in the present" to co-construct and shape the future (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 9). Action Research is a research approach to multiple modalities that focuses on a collaborative process of inquiry. The current study followed the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) form of Action Research with its positive orientation based on a social constructivist perspective that focuses on the generation of appreciative and cooperative dynamics (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Heslop, Stojanovski, Paul & Bailey, 2018).

There are several intervention models associated with AI; the main one is the 4-D cycle by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (1987, as cited in Bushe & Kassam, 2005). The first step of the cycle is called the "discovery step" and focuses on learning about successful practices and experiences of the participants. The second step is defined as the "dream step," which is based on previous and present practices and involves "the creation of the dream to build on" learning experiences (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014,

p. 56). The "design step" is the third step in the AI framework, and it relates to the co-construction of propositions through positive stories participants tell to each other (Giles & Kung, 2010) imagining better actions for the future (Wong, 2012). At this stage of the research, provocative themes emerge grounded in the information shared by the participants and later analyzed by the researcher. The final step is the "destiny step," which involves the formulation of an action plan as a result of the contributions made in the previous steps (Giles & Kung, 2010).

Study setting and research questions

The purpose of the present study is to learn about tutors' and tutees' perceptions towards the effectiveness of the ASP in providing improved and meaningful teaching and learning experiences through the elaboration of an action plan (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Therefore, the research project, framed as an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) qualitative Action Research study, seeks to explore two main research questions:

1. What are the tutees' and tutors' perceptions of their experience at the ASP?
2. How can students' perceptions of their experience at the ASP be co-constructed so as to become more meaningful in the future?

Question 1 corresponds to the first two phases of the AI approach described above, the "discovery step" and the "dream step." It focuses on discovering and learning about the participants' experiences at the tutoring program. The aim is to invite them to dream about better events. Question 2 relates to the "design phase," and it deals with engaging participants to collaboratively create new ideas to improve the way the ASP operates. The answers to both questions will become the input for the formulation of an action plan (Giles & Kung, 2010) to improve participants' future learning experiences, which corresponds to the final step of the AI form, the "destiny step."

Context and Participants

The research was conducted in the Faculty of Education at a large and private university in Chile. The primary objective is to discover tutees' and tutors' perceptions of their learning experiences within the ASP through focus group interventions (Kung, Giles & Hagan, 2013). The purpose is to strengthen the positive aspects identified about the teaching and learning process to generate the necessary adjustments. In this way, future experiences can become more meaningful for every participant.

Every student from Basic General Education, Physical Education, Musical Education, Preschool Education,

Pedagogy in English, and Psychopedagogy was invited to participate in the study, and only those interested accepted. The convenience sampling had a total number of 21 participants distributed as 9 tutors and 12 tutees. Each of them received a Participant Information Sheet, and a Participant Consent Form to sign.

Ethical considerations

Because the research involved collecting data from people, there was a possibility to encounter potential threats not only to the study but also to the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Sensitivity might derive from the perception of intrusion into privacy or fear of exposure. Hence, to address potential ethical issues, the researcher informed the academic community about the purpose of the study, even before the participants embarked on it (Oliver, 2003). The informed consent was presented early during the investigation process to protect both the researcher and the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Being specific and transparent even before the data collection process might reduce potential ethical problems with the participants and increase mutual trust between the researcher and the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Data Sources

In order to address the research questions, the researcher implemented 12 qualitative focus group interviews to tutors and tutees. The focus groups lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. They were recorded and then transcribed, providing rich data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analyses of the focus group interviews were used to identify patterns across the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To become immersed in the data, the researcher read through the transcriptions, analyzed them inductively, and searched for common codes. Then, the emergent codes were "grouped together under higher-order headings" (Burnard, 1991, p. 462), and categories were created. The purpose was to reduce the number of emergent codes; thus, those that were similar were collapsed into broader categories. The categories were clustered and connected to the identified themes and subthemes related to the research and the focus group questions outlined earlier in this paper (Carbone, 2014). The transcripts were reviewed several times alongside the final list of codes and categories. Instead of using a qualitative data analysis software program to categorize and classify the data collected from the focus group interviews, the researcher implemented a manual technique. The process involved the use of a

variety of colors for the grouping analysis across the data according to the similarities identified.

There was a consultation process that lasted the entire process of the study. The researcher engaged in group discussions with the leading team of the ASP to review the list of codes and categories created. In addition, the validation group consisted of two experts in the field who were colleagues not involved in any other aspect of the research. They carefully reviewed the data collected, the process of analysis of the data, and the final list of codes and categories to provide critical feedback (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). The participants also were invited to be part of the validation group. They reviewed the transcripts and highlighted the main points that emerged from the focus group.

Finally, the information shared by the participants is referred to along with the discussion of each theme in the results and discussion section of this paper. The working themes and the related sub-themes were shaped into provocative propositions that became the basis of a personalized action plan for future better practices within the ASP (Kung, Giles & Hagan, 2013).

Results and Discussion

The findings from the investigation are presented around the tutees' and tutors' descriptions of their experiences that reflect the level of effectiveness of the ASP, particularly the aspects that have worked and the challenges encountered by the participants. Two central themes and four subthemes emerged from the focus-group interviews, which are summarized in the following figure and then explained.

Figure 1
Themes and sub-themes related to the research
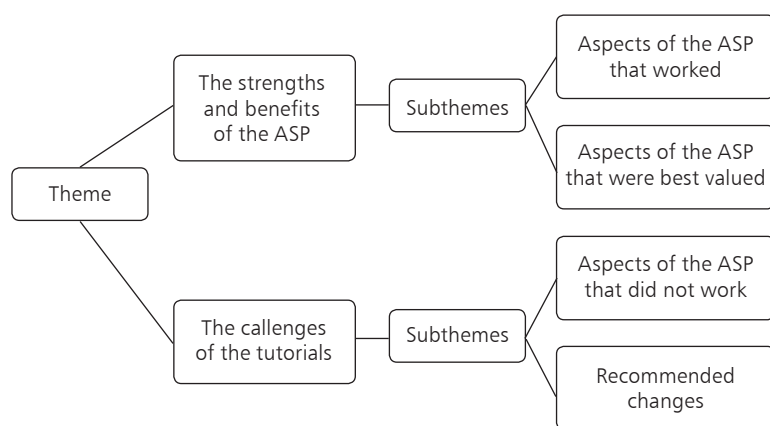
Source: Own elaboration

Strengths and benefits of the Academic Support Program (ASP)
The first theme co-constructed from the focus-group interviews was based on the strengths and benefits of the ASP. From this first theme, two sub-themes emerged which were defined as the aspects of the ASP that worked and those that were best valued.

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Aspects of the ASP that worked

Participants shared interpretations related to their personal satisfaction as tutors as well as the tutorials' positive support for the tutees' learning process. The recurring expressions of tutors' satisfaction when teaching others, as indicated in Table 1 at the end of the present article, evidence their gratitude for being valued among their peers (Jenkinson & Benson, 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016). The following are some of their interpretations: Participant (P) 18 "It has been an enriching experience helping peers." P17 "Helping tutees with different learning styles has been motivating." P3 "I gained prestige among the tutees." Tutors perceived the tutoring program as an opportunity to practice and improve their teaching skills, and as part of their professional learning experience (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Cabrera-Murcia, 2017). For instance, P2 mentioned "[I]t is like being in charge of a class… the same thing I will do in the future." When students perform as tutors, they improve their knowledge because they understand the topic they have to teach at a deeper level (Stigmar, 2016) such as P1 who added "[I] acquired the capacity to answer questions accurately." Tutors also highlighted the positive influence of peer tutoring on tutees' learning experience. For example: P4 and P15 viewed the tutorials as a support to the tutee's learning process.

In the case of the tutees, they focused on the ASP's impact on their learning process and their self-emotional development. P6 mentioned that "being helped by a peer who experienced the same fears gave me hope and courage … I felt less stressed and willing to participate." Tutees found it motivating to be taught by a peer who experienced similar fears and challenges, and who has succeeded (Gerhart, 2012). P5 and P6 added, "Even though my tutor did not believe he was able to succeed in the class, he finally did, and this gave me hope." Accordingly, tutors became tutees' models (Longfellow, May, Burke & Marks-Maran, 2008) and were able to understand tutees' problems and to explain concepts at an appropriate level, better than the teachers (Gerhart, 2012; Stigmar, 2016), who tended to overlook their learning difficulties. For example, P19 claimed that "sometimes it was difficult to follow the teacher's explanations, but the tutor gave me the opportunity to go over the same topics again." It happened that tutees appreciated the non-traditional teaching and learning experience tutors shared with them during the tutoring sessions (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016). P5 added that the tutor used many useful teaching strategies that facilitated the learning of peers (Stigmar, 2016). For example, P8, P14 and P13 appreciated when tutors gave them the opportunity to clarify doubts.

Tutees also found tutors to be approachable peers. For instance, P7 mentioned "[I] appreciated the tutor's willingness to answer every question." Tutees perceived an inclusive and supportive environment, which enhanced their learning abilities, their academic performance, their grades, and self-confidence (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Tinto, 1997). For example, P1, P6, and P8 enjoyed and appreciated the positive learning environment free from criticism. Consequently, their stressful experiences of not knowing and continuously failing began to decrease (Schaffer, Wile & Griggs, 1990) as well as their levels of anxiety. Finally, a sense of academic accomplishment flourished, they started to believe in themselves, and their levels of motivation and commitment to learning increased.

Tutees talked about the influence that extrinsic motivation had on their learning outcomes, as mentioned in Table 1. Some examples are: P8,

P16 and P19 appreciated the extra credits they gained from their participation at the ASP. As a consequence, their final grade in the core classes increased, and they did not need to take the final exam. To conclude, the extra credits tutees obtained by their active participation in the ASP, as well as their success in their core classes, were the extrinsic motivation they valued.

The proposition that was co-constructed from this sub-theme was that tutors not only learned twice as much from the experience of teaching others, but they also gained prestige among the tutees (Stigmar, 2016; Tinto, 1997). Tutees, on their part, benefit from the safe environment tutors generated and their level of anxiety decreased, as described in Table 1 shown at the end of the present study (Topping, 1996, p. 328). Students' active participation was linked to extrinsic motivational strategies that impacted their academic results and engagement to learning, as indicated in Table 1.

Aspects of the Academic Support Program (ASP) that were best valued

Tutors reported the following considerations related to what they most valued from their experience at the ASP:

> P18 The action of teaching others made me study carefully, so in my role as a tutor I ended up learning more than in my entire Higher Education training.
>
> P4 It was a valuable learning experience for students and tutors.
>
> P18 [T]he doubts of some were the strengths of others… and tutees' interactions fostered individual and collective learning.

Some of the tutees, on their part, reflected on what they most valued from their experience at the ASP and shared the following comments:

> P5 I have noticed a personal growth and commitment.
>
> P6 I felt inspired to review the core class material before the tutorial sessions.
>
> P20 I engaged in my learning process and integrated knowledge (through critical thinking strategies).
>
> P10 The tutorial sessions developed a sense of collective growth and the foundation of a peer learning network.
>
> P5 Teamwork was a strategy that I valued the most.

As can be seen, group activities and exchange of knowledge among students were useful tools that fostered not only tutees' learning but also tutors' training development (Chois-Lenis, Casas, López-Higuera, Prado-Mosquera & Cajas-Paz, 2017), transferable to their future professional roles (Jenkinson & Benson, 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Moreover, peer tutoring allowed tutors and tutees to learn from each other, reformulate their learning, and integrate knowledge (Qureshi & Stormyhr, 2012; Worley & Naresh, 2014). As described in Table 1, collaborative work environments fostered collective learning (Miquel & Duran, 2017). Tutors' and tutees' main reflections focused on the pedagogical benefits of the ASP. To mention some examples, they highlighted critical thinking, motivation, collaborative (Stigmar, 2016), and collective learning network (Miquel & Duran, 2017), safe learning environments, and students' "ownership of the learning process" (Topping, 1996, p. 325).

The proposition that was co-constructed from this sub-theme was that tutors and tutees valued the ASP as an experience that gave them a

sense of ownership of their learning, and as a contribution to the integration of knowledge as part of their life-long learning, as mentioned in Table 1. Finally, tutors' and tutees' social interactions enabled a collaborative learning environment that promoted collective growth without fearing judgment (Miquel & Duran, 2017; Reichenberg, Avissar & Sagee, 2015).

The aforementioned propositions from both subthemes might inspire educational leaders to focus their efforts on motivating senior students to become tutors. In this way, tutors can gain practical and meaningful teaching experiences before they engage in the real workplace world (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Finally, creating non-traditional teaching and learning experiences as well as safe and collaborative environments for students at risk might foster their sense of ownership of their learning. As a result, it might increase students' levels of academic success, and this, in turn, can become the key for higher education to reduce dropout rates.

Challenges of the Tutorials

The second theme that emerged from the focus-group interviews was the challenges of the ASP and the proposals for improvement. There were two sub-themes identified: aspects of the ASP that did not work and the recommended changes.

Aspects of the Academic Support Program (ASP) that did not work

Participants identified a lack of communication between tutors and the teachers of the core classes. Some examples are:

> P18 Have I had more feedback from the teacher, I would have known how to help students better than I actually did.
> P3 The communication between the teacher and the tutor was not fluent.
> P5 and P6 There is a disconnection between the work of the tutor and the teacher.
> P6 The tutor did not know how to help us.

Communication is the key to success (Loke & Chow, 2007; Ragonis & Hazzan, 2009). However, it can be inferred from the data collected that there is a feeling of frustration associated with a lack of communication and teamwork between tutors and teachers. The role of teachers is vital to provide the support and guidance tutors need (Gazula, McKenna, Cooper & Paliadelis, 2016). At the same time, tutors' and teachers' engagement with tutees' learning process is crucial. To conclude, it is the ASP's objective to reach everybody's engagement and foster cooperative learning.

Some tutors mentioned that the dissemination of information related to the objectives and benefits of the ASP was inefficient. For example, P4 mentioned that "[T]here were only three students attending the tutorial sessions and I know at least twenty of them who needed academic support."

Several participants reported a lack of responsibility and awareness on the part of some tutees as well as some tutors. For example, P7 and P14 reported that few students valued and took advantage of the peer tutoring sessions. P2 added the following: "students should be able to see the usefulness of the ASP and to take advantage of the opportunity it offers to their academic development, but they do not." P15 and P17 indicated that those who need academic support did not attend the tutorial sessions. P8, P10 and P13 concluded that there was a lack of some tutees' and

tutors' commitment. Consequently, there is a need to promote more significant learning engagement and commitment on the part of students. Fostering a partnership among tutors and tutees may inspire and motivate both groups to take responsibility for their academic progress and build greater confidence and capacity as learners (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). When students experience the benefits of a partnership their eagerness to learn increases, and consequently they resist to go back to the position where they felt stuck and hopeless (Werder, Thibou & Kaufer, 2012). Therefore, fostering a learning community becomes a way to enhance motivation and to overcome students' lack of responsibility for their learning.

Many students remarked that the tutorial sessions were inefficiently scheduled, which affected the attendance rate. For instance: P2 and P3 "It is hard to find a schedule that fits everyone." P5 "In some cases, the tutor did not come to the sessions because he was doing his practice at a school." P7 "I ended up exhausted trying to adjust my core classes' schedules and the tutorial sessions' schedule."

The proposition that was framed from this subtheme was that tutors and teachers need to engage in thoughtful and collaborative dialogues to exchange knowledge and successful experiences as strategic tools to better meet the needs of students in educational disadvantage, as shown in Table 1. Moreover, it is crucial to develop an awareness of the benefits of the ASP among the learning community to promote tutees' participation, as mentioned in Table 1. Finally, the tutorials should be included in the students' schedule as part of their academic duties to allow everyone to find the time to gather.

Recommended changes

During the focus group interventions, participants shared insightful reflections about ways to increase the effectiveness of the ASP. Among some of their observations, they mentioned the ineffective scheduling of the tutorial sessions and strongly recommended administrators to strategically plan the tutorial sessions within the curriculum grid, as described in Table 1. P19 mentioned that "tutoring hours should be a component of the core class." Adjusting the programming of the tutorial sessions is a simple change that can positively impact the attendance rate, and consequently might improve academic outcomes. Perhaps technology can be a way, as P17 concluded, "the university should provide online academic support that may replace the regular in-class tutorials for those who cannot attend."

Interestingly, the vast majority of students who attended the ASP were those who were not at an academic disadvantage, while students who needed help did not participate, or did so less frequently. Besides, students who participated in the peer tutoring sessions passed their core classes, as P7 highlighted "those who passed the core classes were the ones attending the ASP." P2 added that "tutees should know about the benefits of the tutorials" and P15 concluded that "the university has to do something to increase students' commitment." For this to happen, it is important to generate awareness among the students regarding the relevance of their participation in the peer tutoring sessions and the impact this has on their learning outcomes. P4 and P6 suggested to include an academic incentive to promote and increase students' participation.

The proposition that emerged from this last subtheme was that those in charge of the ASP need to plan ways to increase the level of students' commitment and engagement during the tutoring sessions (Alzahrani & Leko, 2018). Moreover, it is crucial to encourage students to take advantage of the support the tutorials offer, as indicated in Table 1. An academic incentive fosters students' learning engagement and consequently contributes to higher grades, which in turn may contribute to students' lives, as described in Table 1 (Paloyo, Rogan & Siminski, 2016). Moreover, the tutorials have to be strategically programmed within students' schedules, allowing them all to attend. Finally, the ASP should be part of the curriculum, as suggested in Table 1.

The aforementioned propositions from both subthemes might inspire educational leaders to focus their efforts on increasing tutees' levels of participation by integrating the ASP as one of the components of the core classes' evaluations. Moreover, the findings might inspire researchers to evaluate the influence of the ASP by correlating tutees' attendance and participation at peer tutoring sessions and their grades in the core classes. To conclude, the ideas that emerged from the dialogues might inform educational leaders regarding the actions that can be taken to improve the participants' experience at the ASP.

Implications
Action Plan Based on the Emerged Propositions

During the focus groups tutors and tutees shared their experience as participants of the ASP. From their stories, the researcher elaborated propositions that became vision statements for an action plan. The action plan aims to improve the ASP through strategies to follow to enhance tutees' and tutors' practices for better future peer-tutoring sessions (Kung, Giles & Hagan, 2013).

The following table identifies the actions that are strategies intended to better meet the objectives of the ASP and increase participants' positive experiences.

Table 1

Action Plan Based on the Emerged Propositions

	Propositions	Action	When
1	Tutors learned from the experience of teaching others.	Systematically offer the opportunity to senior students to become tutors as part of their pre-service teaching development.	Ongoing and before each semester
	Tutees benefit from safe environments that decrease their level of anxiety.	Continue to promote peer tutoring since it generates greater students' satisfaction and less feeling of intimidation and anxiety, in comparison to teacher instruction.	Ongoing
	Students' active participation was linked to extrinsic motivational strategies that impacted their academic results and engagement to learning.	Promote extrinsic motivational strategies to increase tutees' participation at the ASP to positively influence their learning experience.	During the semester
2	Tutors and tutees valued the ASP as an experience that gave them a sense of ownership of their learning, which in turn can contribute to the integration of knowledge as part of their life-long learning.	Continue to prioritize academic support since it fosters learners to actively engage in their learning and the construction and integration of knowledge.	Every semester
	Tutors and tutees' social interactions enabled a collaborative learning environment which promoted collective growth.	Foster community of learners to develop a sense of belonging and ownership of tutees' learning by providing a safe environment where they can share doubts and problems.	Every semester
3	Tutors and teachers need to engage in collaborative dialogues to exchange knowledge to better meet the needs of students in educational disadvantage.	Develop a strategic dissemination of information to increase students' awareness of the ASP's benefits. For example, presentations and workshops.	Ongoing and before each semester
	It is crucial to raise awareness of the benefits of the ASP among the learning community to promote tutees' participation.	Schedule reflective meetings for teachers and tutors to share information regarding their tutees' strengths and weaknesses.	At the beginning of each semester
		Develop a community of colleagues where teachers and tutors engage in learning.	Ongoing and before each semester
	The ASP should be included in the students' schedule.	Include the tutorial sessions in the students' class calendars.	Before each semester starts
4	People in charge of the ASP need to plan ways to increase the level of commitment of students and to encourage them to take advantage of the support the tutorials offer.	Establish a routine for administrators and faculty with full teaching loads to engage students and notify them about the benefits of the ASP via in-class brief presentations and an online student information system.	Ongoing and before each semester
	An academic incentive fosters students' learning engagement and consequently contributes to higher grades.	Apply academic incentives to tutees that attend the tutorial sessions.	Every semester
	The tutorials have to be strategically programmed within students' schedule.	Strategically schedule the tutorial sessions within the curriculum grid.	Before each semester starts
	The ASP should be part of the Curriculum.	Generate ongoing faculty and administrators' reflections on the need to incorporate ASPs in the Curriculum.	Ongoing

Source: Own elaboration

Limitations

Despite the systematic invitation to the academic community to be part of the focus group interviews, the number of participants was less than desired. It can be concluded that there was some resistance by some key academic members whose lack of support and engagement have challenged the implementation of the program. Even though it is a topic beyond the central scope of the present study, it is essential to focus on what factors trigger resisters' defensive thinking that places them in a self-protected attitude unwilling to support a transformational endeavor (Argyris, 2002; Tagg, 2007).

It is clear that change cannot occur overnight. It takes time, commitment, determination, and inspiration (Tagg, 2007). Perhaps encouraging dialogue at all levels within the Faculty of Education and the University itself might foster a collaborative analysis of plans and programmes that sustain long-term transformational change (Boyce, 2003; Branson, 2008; Holbeche, 2006; Paloyo, Rogan & Siminski, 2016). Moreover, identifying those followers who appreciate the program might influence the rest of the skeptical members (Marshall, 2007). Consequently, generating a collaborative and mutual trust environment (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016) might reduce the level of resistance (Piggot-Irvine, 2015). Therefore, promoting shared values among academics, leaders and tutors can permeate the entire group and energize the program (Williams, 2009).

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to learn about the tutees' and tutors' perceptions of their experience at the Academic Support Program (ASP) of the Faculty of Education at a private university in Chile to co-construct future practices based on what has worked. The educational leaders of the university where the study was conducted should use the tutors' and tutees' main reflections on the pedagogical advantages of the ASP to plan actions that focus on the generation of collaborative and safe learning environments.

The results evidenced that those who participated appreciated the learning experience. The friendly environment enhanced their levels of self-confidence and sense of belonging. In the case of tutors, they perceived the peer tutoring program as an opportunity to learn and improve their teaching skills because the best way to learn is to teach (Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes & Mellis, 2016; Stigmar, 2016). Tutees enjoyed engaging in active and collective learning because they felt less intimidated, which in turn reduced their levels of anxiety. However, it should be noted that most of the students who participated in the ASP were not necessarily at an academically disadvantage position. It could be interesting to focus on students' emotional factors, such as intrinsic motivation, grit, and resilience, as an explanation of why students who need help do not seem interested in institutional support programmes.

The observations mentioned above might motivate other investigations to explore not only students' cognitive skills and competencies but also other non-IQ predictors of achievement, such as students' stress, anxiety, and intrinsic motivation. With this information, leaders could plan actions to target other challenges of the learning process that influence students' academic performance (Duckworth, 2006).

Some of the recommendations that emerged from the analysis relate to the need to foster a collaborative teamwork environment between teachers and tutors. This mutual engagement might lead to developing a

learning community among teachers and students. Moreover, the findings of the study might inspire other researchers to reflect on the relationship between collaborative learning among peers and their feelings of ownership of the learning process. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the value students give to their sense of achievement over their grades and see how this can foster individuals' ownership of their learning. To conclude, the findings of the current study might inspire educational leaders to take actions that can improve peer tutoring programmes.

Acknowledgments

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