

Let the Nightingale sing!

The Nightingale mentoring program was born in 1997, in Malmö, Sweden, inspired by the mentoring program *Perach*, in Israel. As manager of the program, I have had the privilege of meeting more than 4 000 mentors and children since its start. Every year a “new Nightingale generation” - those who otherwise wouldn’t meet, now meet.

I like the idea of mutual benefit; one pair, but two persons, having a meaningful time together and being granted unique insight into each other’s worlds and living conditions. Mentors and children can do things they otherwise wouldn’t do, visit places they otherwise wouldn’t visit and accumulate a *social- and cultural capital*. Not only do they gain access into a wider community, they learn more about themselves as individuals.

The child centred approach used by the Nightingale program strengthens the children’s self-esteem. Many of them talk about and remember having been encouraged, in the spirit of equality, to bring their own ideas to the table (Sild Lönroth 2007). I am often amazed at how much the children develop in the relation, not least when it comes to their language, something that research also has confirmed (Feu 2015). “I want to practice my Swedish” is a common answer when we ask children about why they would like to have a mentor. Mentors can help children express and describe their thoughts, and indeed to express their negative experiences and to view them as opportunities for growth and learning.

Over the years, I have also encountered situations where education has been the most important factor to prevent social exclusion, and mentors have made a big difference in this respect. For a child to have someone who supports, encourages and inspires you, gives you new perspectives and believes in your potential certainly makes a big difference. Simply visiting the university and listening to someone talking about their education can also awaken a child’s educational aspirations. In the best case, she or he finds a “possible self” in their mentor, an example of what they might or could become themselves (DuBois et al. 2011). A hope for the future that can stimulate and motivate their learning. In interviews I conducted with former mentor children, many of whom are in high school now, one child for instance noted that “I didn’t know that the university existed at the time, but I was inspired by my mentor to think about what I could do in the future.” Another child told me “it’s down to what you see yourself. You don’t see your parents studying, they are not sitting there head in a book. They can only tell you what to do not show it” (Sild Lönroth 2007).

I believe that the Nightingale program is *one* effective instrument that, in the long run, can help us address the major social imbalance in our society. In Malmö, we are happy about our program’s “recycling,” that many former mentor children, now students, choose to be mentors themselves and that a new generation of the Nightingale is born!

Today, when intolerance is spreading across Europe and people build mental walls between themselves and others, mentoring is a concrete example of integration that allows people to talk TO, not ABOUT each other. It gives people the possibility to understand and be understood. To see the other person as an individual rather than a spokesperson for a particular religious or ethnic group. It is a win-win concept. I am convinced that meetings between people can change attitudes much quicker than information ever can do.

I also believe that universities serve an important role in widening participation and inclusion. Studentmentors can be proactive members of their communities and reflect on socio-cultural complexities and challenges in their studies in order to help build a more socially sustainable society. Mentoring is one way of achieving this goal. It is *learning by doing – but also learning by reflective doing*. By being a mentor, you become more aware of socio-economic questions and about social injustices and inequalities. You also strengthen your self-efficacy and gain new perspectives of yourself and of others. It is a personal and professional development. As one student put it, “to meet, see and know a child and her family is different from reading about it. A face to face meeting doesn’t compare with what you read.”

The International Nightingale mentoring program

The Nightingale program has expanded both nationally and internationally to 24 sites. The model has also been tried with other target groups, such as youths, seniors, refugees and entrepreneurs. One of the program’s most effective tools is its strict framework. It relies on a proven concept and there is a clear structure and work flow in terms of recruiting, interviewing, matching, supervision and selecting joint activities, as well as continuous monitoring of the project’s basic structuring. (Sild Lönroth 2015) However, the core of the mentoring program is certainly the relationship between the mentor and the child.

In the year 2006, I became the head of the Comenius 2.1 EU-application *MentorMigration: Training of students as mentors for migrant children in Europe* whose aim was to expand the Nightingale to other European countries. Sixteen partners from different cities in Europe were invited to participate and the goal was to implement central parts of the Nightingale program to seven European countries and to spread it to greater audiences on conferences and workshops. The partners except Malmö, Sweden, were Stavanger in Norway, Zug in Switzerland, Linz in Austria, Freiburg and Berlin in Germany, Girona in Spain and Ljubljana in Slovenia.

I am happy about the good results. Every partner city began to run their own Nightingale project with success, several prizes were won, articles were written and lectures given, and approximately 1000 mentors and mentees participated in the Nightingale over the course of three years. In Linz, several Erasmus IP courses were also introduced. When *Mentor Migration* was concluded in 2009, members still wanted to continue the cooperation, and in 2010 *The Nightingale Mentoring Network* was established. At this point I also invited several

partners I had already cooperated with in different pilot projects.

Today, more than one thousand mentors and children across Europe meet every week. A unique opportunity to learn, reflect and develop key skills for lifelong learning.

I have followed the Nightingale in Linz over the years and I am very happy with the results, which were also made visible to a greater audience when the town of Linz gave them an integration award in May 2018. I wish all the Nightingales in Linz the best of luck and I hope that their Nightingale will sing for another ten years, at least.

www.nightingalementoringnetwork.org

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