

Making a Difference with At-risk Students: The Benefits of a Mentoring Program in Middle School

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As students in middle school encounter and struggle with social and emotional changes that occur during this transitional period to adulthood, many educators seek to help students develop skills and dispositions—such as resilience, perseverance, and determination—to ensure that they can problem-solve and work through challenges as well as take ownership of their learning and decisions (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). In order to provide all students with opportunities to develop such skills and dispositions during this transitional period, many schools implement mentoring programs, which provide meaningful opportunities to help students develop into responsible adults.

***This We Believe* characteristics:**

- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate
- Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents
- The school includes community and business partners

Multiple research studies document the social and emotional benefits that middle school students receive through mentoring programs, especially those students at risk of not completing high school (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012 Komosa-Hawkins, K. (2012). Various mentoring programs exist which seek to provide middle school students with positive role models; however, mentor and mentee relationship development is critical in producing an effective relationship. Research findings about mentoring programs suggest that mentoring programs focusing on building strong and meaningful relationships between mentor and mentee may have the greatest benefit to adolescents (Larose et al., 2010), and that those programs with specific goals for mentors may provide the greatest benefit to mentees in middle school (Pryce, 2012 Pryce, J. (2012). Relationships that focus on building a supportive relationship between the mentor and mentee and establishing autonomy and relatedness for the mentee may provide the most benefit to at-risk students during the period of adolescence

(Larose, Cyrenne, Garceau, Brodeur, & Tarabulsy, 2010; Larose, S., Cyrenne, D., Garceau, O., Brodeur, P., & Tarabulsy, G. M. (2010). As educators seek to improve the social and emotional development of young adolescents, developing strong mentoring programs may provide a benefit to students and those in the community (NMSA, 2010 National Middle School Association (NMSA). (2010).

A setting for mentoring

At a middle school in a large Southern city, the realities of low socioeconomic status adolescents' challenges with social and emotional development are similar to those in other parts of the country. Most students at the school are considered as living below the poverty level. Leaders in the school witnessed students' ever-declining grades and increasing truancy and discipline referrals, which prompted them to create a mentoring program to provide students with role models as mentors from the local college. As advocates of the community, the author and school administrators worked together to create a program with student volunteers. As a professor in the college of education, the author asked for volunteers to mentor students in the program as a way to gain experience working with youth and as a service to the community. Mentors were asked to volunteer for one semester, though many volunteered for a longer period of time. At the conclusion of the semester, mentors wrote a reflection to explain how their mentees developed during the semester-long experience. Following the 3-year partnership, the gradual transformation of the middle school students was evident; students began to develop ownership and interest in their education, grades increased, and truancy decreased.

By providing students with role models who have made choices to attend the local college, many of the students participating in the mentoring program began to believe that they could also attend college, have careers, and live meaningful lives. As schools and colleges work together, middle level students may have greater opportunities to learn from responsible adults whom they can trust. This article discusses previous research findings about mentoring programs and describes the beneficial outcomes that resulted from one specific mentoring program.

Mentoring

There is a great need for effective mentoring relationships in today's culture, and the potential for academic influence is tremendous. There is an increasing number of parents/guardians who divide their time and attention between social responsibilities and providing basic needs for their children, specifically quality care, attention, and support to help them succeed in an ever-changing society of innovation (Baharudin, Chi Yee, Sin Jing, Zulkefly, 2010; Baharudin, R., Chi Yee, H., Sin Jing, L., & Zulkefly, N. (2010). Educational goals, parenting practices and adolescents' academic achievement. *Asian Social Science*, 6(12), 144–152.[CrossRef]). Adolescents need a supportive relationship because of the subsequent investment and "social capital" that comes with that relationship (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams, J. M., & Bryan, J. (2013).

Fortunately, the last twenty years have seen a significant surge in the quantity and quality of mentoring-based programs for students. Organizations like Big Brothers, Big Sisters (BBBS), TEAMmates, Study Buddies, and The Mentoring Project have grown in their visibility and their influence as well as their research justification (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). In fact, Tierney et al.'s (1995) study with BBBS launched mentoring into the forefront of educational strategies, influencing studies across the country. One finding suggested that students mentored by BBBS "were more confident of their performance in schoolwork and 52% less likely to skip school" (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 36). Furthermore, the president of the research agency stated, "These dramatic findings are very good news, particularly at a time when many people contend that 'nothing works' in reaching teenagers.... This program suggests a strategy the country can build on to make a difference, especially for youth in single-parent families" (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 5). These research findings have provided insight and credit to these mentoring programs and validated not only their existence, but also their growing need and far-reaching influence.

Characteristics of effective mentors

The foundation for developing effective mentors is built on appropriate training sessions and clear directions, including thorough and necessary background checks and professional development about adolescent culture and relationship building (Dappen & Iserhagen, 2005). Just like any other significant role, a clear direction and working understanding of appropriate mentoring procedures are crucial to the effectiveness of the mentor. This is visible in one study that suggests mentors in helping or teaching roles are effective because they hold a natural position that lends itself to connecting with students (Ahrens, DuBois, Lozano, & Richardson, 2010).

Successful mentors are those who possess warmth and are responsive to inferred needs of the mentee (Van Ryzin, 2010; Van Ryzin, M. (2010)). There is an element of liquidity involved in the human side of mentoring, requiring the mentor to respond appropriately and flexibly to the current of the relationship. Mentors should remain predictable and sustainable in their involvement in the process, as ups and downs or early termination of the relationship may have negative consequences for the mentee and may mimic the unpredictable nature some mentees experience in their home lives (Van Ryzin, 2010). There are limited data regarding the age of effective mentors, although Radcliffe and Bos (2011) posed the idea that middle school students positively respond to college-aged mentors, while high school students connect well with adult mentors.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of an effective mentor is that he or she is goal-oriented and seeks to "build the relationship" (DeSocio et al., 2007). That is, the mentor strives to establish a human connection with the mentee where empathy and understanding are key. The building of the relationship is likened to the building of a bridge between two people, something that takes planning, resources, and time to transport positive ideas and values to the mentee. Adults who build these relationships of trust seek to understand the student and act as an advocate on his or her behalf (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams, J. M., & Bryan, J. (2013)).

Nature of the mentoring relationship

The nature of the mentoring relationship involves three parts: relational connection, the relational role, and relational closeness. Meaningful, healthy relationships are essential for students' development and engagement in their education (Cullen & Monroe, 2010 Cullen, K., & Monroe, J. (2010). This idea is reflected in the mentor–student relationship, as a mentor's effectiveness for engaging students is directly tied to how well the mentor knows his or her students (Houston, 2006 Houston, M. (2006). Merwin's (2002) findings claimed that interpersonal relationships prove to be effective mainly because of the relational void that exists in many students' lives. Students need support and acknowledgement that extends beyond their academic development; many are in need of someone to enter into their lives on a consistent basis and let them know they are interested in more than just how they perform on a test. Mentors must reach students on the human level, learning what it means to walk in their shoes and keep in touch in their world (Merwin, 2002).

The nature of the mentoring relationship can be fluid, changing as the student develops and reflecting the student's needs, so it is important to consider which of the diverse types of relational roles best influences the mentee. For example, where a teaching role is influential in middle grades, a more supportive and goal-oriented role has been proven more beneficial during high school years (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). These types of intentional relationships help develop resiliency in mentees, one of the crucial factors to sustaining academic success (Dappen & Iserhagen, 2005). Other roles related to the nature of the relationship include the traits of mediation and advocacy (DeSocio et al., 2007). Effective mentors should invest their time and effort for the benefit of the students, keeping their best interests at the forefront of decisions and actions.

Another key component on the nature side of the mentoring relationship deals with levels of closeness. Dappen and Iserhagen's (2005) research findings suggested that sharing personal information and being authentic help to build trust and intensify the emotional closeness shared between the mentor and mentee. When it comes to the nature of the mentoring relationship, Turner (2008) claimed the key is matching students with caring adults who consider their role vital to the academic success of our at-risk students.

Structure of the mentoring relationship

Another important element of mentoring is to understand the structure of the mentoring relationship. Structural considerations include the times, frequency, focus, and duration of meetings. Mentoring relationships are most effective in a one-on-one design, as this design helps to supplement the relational needs the students receives at home and in the classroom (Van Ryzin, 2010). Consistent meetings once or twice a week outside of the classroom may help develop a positive rapport between the student and the mentor (Johnson & Lampley, 2010), and keeping meeting times predictable also contributes to greater effectiveness (Ahrens et al., 2010; DeSocio et al., 2007).

Radcliffe and Bos (2011) included two other effective structural factors of mentoring: flexibility and progress monitoring. They found that while most programs are more rigid with meeting times and topics in the beginning, the best programs gradually allow for greater flexibility and input from the mentor, and even later, the mentee. This shift in ownership helps empower the mentee and encourage academic success. As well,

several studies show evidence that gaining parental/guardian support contributes to effective mentoring. These studies concluded that even though much of the purpose of mentoring is to aid in the absence of parental constructs, particularly in single-parent families, mentoring that engages the parents/guardians and keeps them informed has proven to make a positive difference (Dappen & Iserhagen, 2005; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Rhodes, 2002). All parties involved benefit from consistent monitoring of progress in regards to the mentee, the mentor, and the relationship (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011).

A mentoring program

The mentoring program in the school district, partnering with the university, started over 10 years ago with 100 mentors from the community and grew to over 20,000 participants. However, one middle school in an underserved area of town received less than 1% of these volunteers. Middle schools may have the greatest need for volunteers but may often be overlooked. As a result of caring school administrators, a school librarian, a college professor, and local university students, the mentoring program at the middle school has grown. After 3 years working together, the mentoring program has become an integral part of the school community.

Each semester, middle school students interested in participating in the mentoring program sign up with the school librarian. Students are then paired with mentors from the local high school or college who volunteer for the program. As an advocate for building the mentoring relationship at the middle school level, the author provides an average of 25 mentors each semester for the program. Mentors in the program were paired with a mentee of the same gender and with the same interests. Prior to the first meeting, mentors attended an orientation session to learn what the school district deemed appropriate and inappropriate for the mentor–mentee meetings. Mentors were instructed not to meet with mentees outside of school and not to exchange phone numbers or any other type of personal contact information. Mentors were instructed to talk with and get to know their mentee. Mentors and mentees met once a week for thirty minutes in the library, the gym, or the lunch room. Though some mentors did help their mentees with homework or other assignments, most mentors played games and talked with their mentee about life and shared similar experiences from adolescence. In this program, mentors were able to provide an example to students (mentees) and talked about the importance of graduating from high school and of education. They provided a supportive relationship needed by many of their adolescent mentees.

In the current program, many of the mentors explained that they spent most of their time talking while they played games or engaged in other activities. After a few meetings, the students felt they could trust their mentors and shared many of the struggles and difficulties they encounter during adolescence. Strong ties were created between them, which allowed the mentees to grow in their development by sharing troubling experiences.

To be a successful mentor at the school, the mentor must care about the student. Mentors are encouraged to get to know their mentees and be good listeners. By playing games or engaging in conversations, mentees usually

begin to feel comfortable with their mentors after just a few meetings. Then, mentors and mentees share in conversations about school, friends, and life. Depending on the interests and needs of the mentee and mentor, they meet once a week and play card games, talk, play a game of basketball in the gym, or work on school assignments. The individualization of the program provides the mentee with what he or she needs, both academically and personally.

Mentee experiences

Most mentors meet with their mentees throughout the entire school year for thirty minutes each week, though some college students were only able to participate in the program during one semester because of changes in their schedules or transferring to another university. Though some of the initial meetings begin with awkwardness and small talk, many relationships develop as trust and understanding grow. In her paragraph submitted at the end of the semester, one mentor expressed that she noticed her mentee becoming more lighthearted:

At the beginning of our sessions, all [of the mentee's] stories mainly consisted of family troubles and rough times. However, after three weeks of visits, her stories began to be about what she was doing in her classes and the fun things she was going to do with friends after school. This was a change I was happy to see because that's what a sixth grader should be focused on, not just stressful situations at home. She became more energetic and happy to see me and this was great.

Mentees also had an opportunity to realize that their struggles in school are not unique to them. One mentor wrote that she too experienced difficulty in math, but with hard work, she was able to overcome her problems:

I shared with her my personal struggles with math to help her realize that she is not alone when it comes to a situation like this. On my next visit she came running to the library full of excitement to tell me that she had passed her test.

Mentor experiences

College students participating in the program admitted to changes in their attitudes toward school and established new goals for the future, such as setting goals for after college and putting forth more effort in coursework. Middle school students mentioned that they appreciated the program because they felt their mentor cared for them, "even when no one else does." The mentors helped the middle school students realize that their goals can be accomplished, and that hard work is needed to attain their goals. Middle school students participating in the program mentioned that their mentors helped them to maintain good grades, make better choices, stay out of trouble, and develop a better attitude about school.

One mentor wrote in his paragraph that "[The program] has really given me an insight of the real problems that middle school students go through that some teachers may not see." Many of the middle school students may not have a role model in their lives to encourage them to stay in school, go to college, or pursue a career. However, middle school students participating in the mentoring program at this school can agree that their mentors helped them to establish a positive identity.

Though many of the mentor–mentee relationships worked out well, some did not. Changes are made every year to the program to remind the mentors what is required of them. As mentors, they need to be reminded not to share phone numbers and other personal contact information with their mentees. Also, the mentors sometimes brought gifts to mentees, which set a precedent for others to do the same. This may also be a problem for mentees participating in the program for gifts or rewards instead of the benefit of a mentoring relationship. Despite these few instances, most relationships were positive.

As the mentor program continues to grow at this middle school, other school leaders in the community have begun to work to develop similar programs. The community has several middle schools that need volunteers, and school leaders have reached out to community members and others at the university to increase the number of volunteers to serve as mentors for students. As those involved in the mentoring program have more opportunities to make changes based on the existing mentor and mentee needs, the existing program is likely to continue to grow to reach more students. Though research findings in the area of mentoring are extensive and even contradictory (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Larose et al., 2010; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012), there were benefits experienced by those involved in this mentoring program.

Application

As middle level educators begin the process of creating an effective mentoring program, we suggest contacting local colleges or universities with teacher education programs. Most pre-service teachers are required to have observation hours or experiences working with students; professors may welcome opportunities to provide teacher candidates with the experience of becoming a mentor. Encouraging professors to offer mentoring as an alternative to a course assignment may be another way to encourage involvement in the program.

The next step is to examine the academic impact of mentoring on student success. Effective mentoring engages students who were previously disinterested in learning (Black, 2004). Mentoring relationships that are informal, flexible, listening-oriented, and mentee-driven help to prepare students for life beyond the classroom too, encouraging students to attend either a 2- or 4-year post- high school program or university (Black, 2004). Dappen and Iserhagen (2005) and Ahrens et al. (2010) all agreed that improved grades, better attendance, and a reduction in dropout rates result from effective mentoring. Ahrens et al. ' s(2010) research findings validated that students with learning disabilities who were mentored are more likely to pursue an advanced degree program. Their findings also showed that when students feel like they matter to their teachers, their level of academic motivation increases as well (Ahrens et al., 2010). Ultimately, this motivational increase is the hope and expectation of mentoring programs that focus on the process instead of solely on the results. Providing young adolescents with opportunities to learn from those in their local community with whom they feel comfortable sharing their challenges and accomplishments may empower middle level students by helping them to develop the skills and knowledge needed for their current lives as well as the future phases of their lives (NMSA, 2010).

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