About Student Peer Mentoring

Virtually every aspect of human development is fundamentally shaped by interpersonal relationships. So it stands to reason that when close and caring relationships are placed at the center of a youth intervention, as is the case in mentoring programs, the conditions for healthy development are ripe. Jean Rhodes

Mentoring is an intervention where the mentor (a more experienced individual) provides relationship-based support and guidance that benefits a mentee's development. Peer mentoring is meant to provide the mentee with a positive role model; it also provides the mentor with an opportunity to benefit someone.

Schools have used same-age and cross-age peer mentoring. The primary objectives of any mentoring relationship in schools are to support a student's personal and academic growth; the mentoring often is established for students who are experiencing learning and behavior problems.

What is Student Peer Mentoring?

Student peer mentoring is a highly structured intervention. Most peer mentor programs provide planned activities in a youth-development context, and many use a set curriculum or activity guide. Mentors go through training and are supervised.

Peer mentoring is contrasted with "goal-oriented efforts aimed primarily at improving academic skills (tutoring), resolving interpersonal problems (peer education; peer assistance), or addressing personal problems (counseling). The relationship may touch on these, but is not defined by these 'narrow goals'" (Karcher, 2007). Cross-age peer mentoring usually involves older and "wiser" high schools students working with middle schoolers. Relationships can last for the whole school year and perhaps for multiple school years.

In contrast to adult mentors, peer mentors are seen as able to connect better with mentees,(e.g., peers often communicate their problems to each other more readily than to adults). In addition, some parents of mentees feel more comfortable with a student mentor designated by the school rather than an adult volunteer.

Benefits

Mentoring programs are reported to have positive outcomes. Examples for mentees are feelings of connectedness to school, competency, grades, prosocial behaviors and attitudes, and self-efficacy.

Positive results reported for mentors include enhanced personal and interpersonal skills and connectedness to school, increased confidence, self-esteem, empathy and moral reasoning, interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills, and relationships with parents. Mentor preparation is an added value to their education. And, for high school peer mentors, the activity can strengthen their college and work applications.

In terms of costs to schools, expenditures for recruitment, operational infrastructure, and facilities related to peer mentor programs are relatively low.

> After 13 months of mentoring by *Big Brothers, Big Sisters,* data indicate increased outcomes for mentees in academic attitudes, performance, and behaviors. Participating youth also were more accepted by peers and had more positive beliefs about their ability to succeed in school. More than 76% of at-risk youth aspired to enroll in and graduate from college, versus 56% who did not have a mentor (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014).

Nearly nine in ten mentees report they are interested in becoming mentors

Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014

Limitations of Peer Mentoring

There are caveats about the potential benefits of peer mentoring. The reality is that forming genuine and connected relationships is a difficult process.

Academic as contrasted to relationship-focused discussions and social activities have been linked to less benefits and lower levels of mentor satisfaction (Herrera, 2007). Variability among mentorship programs with respect to curricula, student needs, duration of meeting times, duration of the program, and many contextual matters make determining the effectiveness difficult and a simple answer as to whether a school-based mentoring intervention is worthwhile "will inevitably remain elusive" (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010).

Matching mentors and mentees is difficult. The commitment of mentors and mentees are critical variables. Regular attendance is significantly related to positive outcomes. Inconsistent or low attendance has been reported as potentially doing more harm than good (Karcher, 2005). With respect to cross-age mentoring, researchers suggest that the outcomes for both mentors and mentees are likely to be better if high school age mentors are at least two-year older than their mentees (Karcher, 2007).

A particular concern is the temptation to overrely on interventions such as mentoring in addressing students' problems. School districts are cautioned not to use mentoring in place of professional intervention for youth with serious emotional, behavioral, or academic problems (although mentoring may be a useful adjunct in supporting such youth).

Concluding Comments

Mentoring is an increasingly popular adjunct for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Mentoring programs, especially peer mentoring, is used to provide support not only for at-risk youth, but a wide range of students.

Given that teachers by themselves can't meet the needs of all students, adult and peer mentors and other volunteers are a valuable resource. But, multifaceted and interrelated problems manifested at schools require a more comprehensive approach.

From the perspective of our Center's work on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, mentoring and the myriad of other special interventions that are proposed for schools to pursue must fit into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. Such a system first emphasizes promoting development and preventing problems, then providing a cohesive set of supports for students who still are not doing well at school. (For the most recent in-depth discussion of the system framework, see Adelman & Taylor, 2017, 2018).

References and Resources Used in Preparing this Information Resource

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For more on *Mentoring*, see the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on the topic:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/mentoring.htm