Mentoring “At Risk” Middle School Students:

Strategies for Effective Practice

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of a Teacher Mentor/Student Mentee program developed for at-risk middle school students. Surveys were conducted with 59 mentees and 43 mentors participating in the program for the 2010-2011 school year. The findings of this study illustrate that building the relationship, including recognizing and respecting cultural and gender differences, are critical for successful mentoring. Program strategies found to be effective are discussed with recommendations for middle school practitioners.

Introduction
Many middle school students who are failing academically will become part of the ever increasing dropout statistics in our nation. More than 7000 students in the U.S. become dropouts every school day, nearly 1.3 million students per year. It is estimated that dropouts from 2006 alone will cost taxpayers $17 billion in Medicaid and uninsured medical expenses alone over their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2010). Sadly, dropouts often have children that become dropouts and a cycle is created which continues (Dropout and Truancy Prevention, 2011). Given these statistics and costs to society, it is imperative that we seek solutions to this problem. The concern for at-risk students and dropout prevention has been evident for many decades. Donnelly (1987) described at-risk students as those who are not experiencing success in school, often minority, male, low achievers, with low self-esteem who are labeled as potential dropouts. Research suggests a strong connection between dropout rates and poor school attendance, with underlying issues related to lack of student success in the classroom (Hayes, 2008).

One reason cited for high dropout rates, particularly among males, is the lack of adult mentoring (Career Tech Update, 2008). Many students do not have adequate support at home or in their communities. Additionally, peer pressure often has negative effects on their lives. According to the 16 research-based characteristics of Successful Schools and effective middle grades education, students need an advocate to assist them as they develop both personally and academically (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Mentoring on the middle school level is a vital strategy to help students be successful and stay in school.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of a Teacher Mentor/Student Mentee program for at-risk students at a middle school in North Carolina. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How often are teacher mentor/student mentee sessions conducted?
2. How long are the teacher mentor/student mentee sessions?
3. What do teachers identify as effective strategies for mentoring?
4. What do students believe has helped them the most during mentoring sessions?

The intended outcome of this study was to identify effective strategies of successful mentor/mentee relationships as defined by mentees increased academic achievement and decreased discipline referrals.

**Literature Review**

Students with problematic behaviors and struggle for academic success are at risk for dropping out of school and need a mentor, a one-on-one relationship with an adult role model that many are missing in their daily lives. A mentor is someone who cares about the student and will hold them accountable (Hoover, 2005), encouraging them to become more involved with their education and stay in school (Penn, 2010). A variety of interventions have been established to help students with academic deficiencies, however, social and emotional deficiencies must also be addressed (Carter, 2004). Home circumstances for many students, including lack of adult support, leaves them ill equipped to cope with the social and emotional situations of daily living (Carter, 2004; Johnson, 2008). If paired with a caring and competent adult in a one-on-one
setting, these students can be helped with such challenges and overcome adversity through mentoring (Daloz, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Webster, 2005).

Effective mentoring seeks to establish a positive and trusting relationship between student and adult with focus on needs of the student. The mentor serves to foster a caring and supportive relationship, providing clear guidelines and expectations for the mentee while modeling and promoting self-awareness, self-confidence, management of behavior, and positive attitudes toward assisting others (Webster, 2005). Investing sufficient time (Campbell-Whatley, 2001) for regularly scheduled, formalized meetings with documentation of objectives and outcomes, record keeping appropriate to the activity, consistent monitoring, and evaluation are vital for an effective program (Webster, 2005).

Guidelines for the length and frequency of mentor-student contact must be determined. One to three hours per week is suggested. Mentors should be prepared to make a commitment for the entire academic year. Group and after-school activities must be planned in advance, placed on a calendar of activities, and shared with participants (Campbell-Whatley, 2001, p. 213).

A key factor to consider in establishing such relationships is to match mentor and student based on criteria such as gender, similar interests, personalities, career choices, and cultural or linguistic background (Webster, 2005). Particular attention to the mentees’ experiences, boundaries, and gender differences is advised:

Mentors need to exhibit cultural awareness and respect their mentees as both individuals and members of larger social constructs...[requiring] certain attributes or abilities, including selflessness, active listening skills, honesty, a non-judgmental attitude, persistence, patience, and an appreciation for diversity (Crutcher, 2007, p. 1-2).

In working with middle school African American, male populations, building the relationship, providing extra motivation, and firmer limits and accountability measures have been found to be of key importance to success (Bowman, 2002).

An important element of successful mentoring is the development of a positive relationship between mentor and mentee. Bowman (2002) identifies four strategies as being most important in supporting middle school African American males: building relationships, extra motivation, firmer limits, and having a mentor to hold them accountable. Additional factors contributing to a successful mentoring initiative include active participation and recognition of success. Problems must be identified and resolved early on, requiring assurance of feedback and support between mentor and student (Webster, 2005).

Campbell-Whatley (2001) implemented a mentoring program at the middle school level for students with mild disabilities, guiding them in relating to their environment effectively and in developing their individuality and self-esteem. At the completion of the program, the mentees showed statistically significant higher grade point averages as well as lower absentee and
suspension rates. Central to the program’s success, was that mentors were active participants in: the development, coordination, and implementation of activities that increase academic and behavior success” (Campbell-Whatley, 2001, p. 2006). Further, celebrating the success of milestones is essential (Webster, 2005). Giving certificates to recognize student success and including parents as much as possible are two ways of reinforcing achievements.

Review of the literature provides sound evidence that mentoring can be an effective approach to reducing current school dropout rates while improving student performance in academic, social, and behavioral outcomes. Recommendations for establishing successful mentorships include building the relationship, adequate time investment, documenting accountability measures, and celebrating student success.

**Methodology**

**Sampling**

The middle school selected for this study is a Title I school district in a southern state with 26% of the student population identified as Hispanic learning English-as-a-Second Language (ESL), 50% African American, 22% Caucasian, and 2% Asian or American Indian. Eighty-three percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, with 60% identified as low performing on End of Grade (EOG) tests. In addition to low academic scores, many students received daily discipline offenses or referrals.

The current mentoring program in the middle school selected for this study identifies students considered at-risk because of low grades, poor attendance, discipline referrals, low test scores, personal/social concerns, and family dynamics. However, the mentoring program is not only for at-risk students. A registration period for all students who would like to be assigned to mentors is offered at the beginning of the school year. Mentees were generally paired with mentors by grade levels, gender (when possible) and personal interests.

Sixty-two mentor/mentee pairs were eligible to participate in the study. All staff was expected to participate in the mentoring program. They were allowed to choose a student mentee or were assigned a student mentee for the school year through the guidance department. At the beginning of the school year, the Guidance Department sent emails to all staff allowing them to choose a student to mentor. If a student was not chosen, the Guidance Department matched students with staff. The guidance counselor sent an email list of the mentee/mentor pairs with basic information about the purpose and suggestions for the mentors, a student “Get to Know You” Profile form, the Parent/Guardian permission form, and a Mentor Log. It was suggested they meet with mentees at least once every three weeks.

A total of 59 mentees participated in this study. Mentee subgroups consisted of 52% male and 48% female. The majority of the mentees were African Americans males (45%). Other subgroups consisted of 2% Hispanic males, 5% Caucasian males, 25% African American females, 20% Hispanic females, and 3% Caucasian females. Further subgroups consisted of grade levels. These included 7% female mentees in 6th grade, 23% in 7th grade and 18% in 8th grade. Grade levels of male mentees totaled 12% in 6th grade, 18% in 7th grade, and 22% in 8th
grade. Of participating teachers, \((n = 43)\) 85% indicated this was their first year with their current mentee, 10% said this was their second year, and 5% had the same mentee for a third year.

Data Collection

The database used for student information was from August 2010 until February 2011, a total of six months. This database included information on the number of students transferred from the middle school to the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) as well as statistics on Out of School Suspensions (OSS) and Positive Alternative to School Suspension (PASS). A summary of the middle school’s data collected from September 2010 until February 2011 reported 112 total student offenses. The data showed that October had the most offenses with 36 (32%) offenses. There was a drop in referrals from October to January. Twenty-two students were sent to Alternative Learning Center (ALC) from August through February. African American males had the most referrals within both gender and racial subgroups with a total of seven referrals.

The online surveys were new instruments developed by the researcher in collaboration with faculty members at the local university through a questionnaire development process using Qualtrics Software supported by the university. The student mentee questionnaire consisted of seven logistical questions regarding how often they met with their mentor, length of time of the visits, whether they had improved their grades, or had any disciplinary actions and their perceptions of their mentor and the relationship. The mentees were also asked to rate five items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, their perceptions about their mentoring, and also asked to indicate yes, no, or I don’t know, on a list of eight items. Examples of these eight items included ‘explore mutual topics’, ‘set career goals’, and ‘helped me with my social skills’ etc. The mentor questionnaire was a mirrored image of the mentee questionnaire that asked the same questions but from the perspective of the mentor, rather than the mentee. The questionnaires were also reviewed by few experienced mentors and student mentees for clarity and understanding of questions, and were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the researcher’s university.

Mentees participating in the research completed the online survey during their exploratory classes. A makeup day for absentees was conducted on the following exploratory class day. Exploratory teachers were given a list of mentees by grade level and monitored the mentees’ completion of the survey during this class time. Exploratory teachers read a prepared script giving directions to the students prior to beginning the survey. Students who completed the survey were eligible to participate in a $25 VISA gift card drawing.

Mentors received an email requesting their voluntary and confidential participation in the Qualtrics online survey. A two week period of time was allowed. Mentors who completed the survey were eligible to participate in a $25 gift card drawing. In order to increase participation, mentors received reminders by email, and on the final day a written reminder note was placed in each mentor’s mailbox. On the last day of the second week the gift card drawing was conducted and winners announced over the intercom. One student and one teacher received a gift card from the drawing.

Data Analysis and Interpretation
The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the teacher/student mentoring program for at-risk students at a North Carolina middle school. The surveys were self-reported outcomes from both mentors and mentees. Data collection included no identifiers, and thus responses were anonymous. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Further, the data was mined for common themes from responses to better determine effective mentoring strategies. Validity was determined by requesting feedback from colleagues and respondents.

**Findings and Discussion**

**How often are teacher mentor/student mentee sessions conducted?**

Mentees reported meeting with their mentors less than once a month (25%), once a month (5%), two-three times per month (18%), and four or more times a month (52%).

Mentors reported meeting four or more times a month (41%) to 5% who met less than once a month. Meeting two to three times a month was reported by 33% of mentors and 21% indicated they met only once per month. Some of the comments teachers made concerning this question were: “my mentee was expelled,” “I have her in class,” and “I’ve not been able to correlate a time with the student.”

**How long are the teacher mentor/student mentee sessions?**

Twenty-eight percent of the students reported meeting less than 5 minutes with their mentors. Another 28% reported meeting for 10-14 minutes. Twenty-three percent reported meeting more than 30 minutes. Twelve percent reported that they met 15-29 minutes, and 9% reported meeting five to nine minutes.

The largest percentage of teachers (38%) indicated their mentor/mentee sessions were between 10-14 minutes. Twenty-three percent indicated 15-29 minutes and another 23% indicated the sessions were more than 30 minutes. Nine percent reported five to nine minute sessions, while seven percent indicated meetings lasted less than five minutes.

**What do teachers identify as effective strategies for mentoring?**

In general, seven effective mentoring strategies were reported by mentors. These include encouraging mentee, setting goals, building mentee self-esteem, spending extra-curriculum time with mentees, providing positive mentee role model, helping mentees make positive choices, and improve their grades.

In encouraging mentees, mentors were inspiring mentees to use their talents and make right decisions. The majority of the responses to this open ended question were in this category: “I feel that my role involves being there when they need someone to talk to, encourage them, and help them academically.” “I encourage her to use her gifts and always choose the right no matter what the circumstance.” “I discuss with her that she is so smart [and] that all she needs to do is put her best effort in her class assignments.”
Further, this study shows that mentors were helping mentees to set goals and build self-esteem. “Talking with her about her future and her choices and how they will affect the rest of her life”. “We have set goals and work through a success plan for her behavior and academics.” “I discuss with my mentee her plans and goals for her future. She understands that I have high expectations for her and she should also have them for herself.” “As a mentor, my role is to help my mentee grow and achieve his goals.” “Building confidence and allow mentee to do the required work to achieve his goals,” and “to become a better person.”

The mentors also spent time with mentees and served as positive role models. “My mentee exercises with me,” and “I take time to talk with him about the advantages of pursuing each” (academics and athletics). Other comments included, “To be a role model and encourager,” and “I would hope to have a positive effect on my mentee.”

As with any school, mentors were helping the mentees improve their grade as well as make positive choices. They wrote, “I spend time with my mentee in both academics and athletics areas,” and “we discuss her grades and ways that she can improve, particularly in math class.” “We discuss behavior quite often,” and “we discuss appropriate ways to deal with issues and make better decisions.”

The majority of the teachers felt the mentoring experience was a good experience for them and felt they made a difference in their students’ personal and academic lives. Mentors reported many positive comments concerning their role in helping their mentee realize their potential, such as encouraging them, helping them set goals, talking with them about their future, helping them to see their options in life, and dealing with difficult situations. One mentor responded, “I was not briefed on what I should be doing as a mentor.” Collaborating with other mentors would be helpful, especially for new staff members who may not know how to mentor students.

What do students believe has helped them the most during mentoring sessions?

When asked if they had experienced any discipline consequences this year, 28% reported not experiencing any of the listed discipline consequences during the year. Many students reported SL (Silent Lunch) (63%) and PASS (Positive Alternative to School Suspension) (50%). Eleven percent of students also reported OSS (Out of School Suspension), but none of the participants reported experiencing ALC (Alternative Learning Center) as a discipline consequence during the year. Many students (38%) self-reported that their grades were better with 43% indicating they were about the same. Almost one third (29%) reported an increase in WIRED (We’re Into Reading) points this year (29%).

The majority of the students said their mentoring experience was awesome (43%) or good (24%). Seven percent said it could be better while six percent said it was not so good, and the remaining 20% made other comments such as: “great,” “[my mentor] is a nice person with me,” “love it,” “really fun.” Six negative responses were made such as: “sometimes I ignore her because I think I don’t need help,” “really, really bad,” “we don’t meet,” “don’t have one,” “I don’t know,” “I don’t meet with my mentor.”
Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement to a series of statements on a five-point Likert scale. Student responses were mostly positive and 83% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed meeting with their mentors and 76% indicated they had a positive relationship with their mentor. However, more than half (61%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that their grades improved, 54% agreed or strongly agreed they had fewer classroom behavior issues and discipline referrals, and 56% agreed or strongly agreed that their mentors made a positive difference in their lives. These findings are supported by recent literature (Webster, 2005, Campbell-Whatley, 2001) indicating that developing a relationship was important to the mentor/mentee relationship. Webster (2005) found that the presence of a caring adult in the life of students is an important factor in helping students overcome adversity and achieve at school. Webster also explained that effective mentoring seeks to provide such a presence by establishing a trusting relationship between student and mentor that focuses on the needs of the student. The mentor needs to model and foster a caring and supportive relationship to increase self-confidence, awareness and management of behavior, positive attitudes towards assisting others, and clear guidelines and expectations for the mentee (Webster).

Many students had positive responses to the question when asked specifically what their mentors had done to help them this year. The majority responded “yes” on the following questions regarding their mentors: explored mutual topics with them (57%), set career goals (59%), set personal goals (69%), helped with communication skills (57%), and helped with social skills 63%. Fifty-three percent of students reported that exploring mutual topics was part of their mentoring experience. Thirty-nine percent reported participating in off-campus activities with their mentors, such as going for lunch or ice cream. Although having a meal together is a great way to connect, some teachers reported that time constraints prevented them from doing so.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Overall, students responded positively to their mentor’s help with certain matters during their sessions. They explored mutual topics such as setting career and personal goals, improving communications skills, improving social skills and having healthy peer relationships, and making healthy life choices. All of these are skills important to helping students make good daily decisions at school and in their personal lives. If students are not making good decisions in the classroom it will affect their academic and classroom behavior. In retrospect, it’s also important that students be guided in making good decisions at home and in their personal lives, the consequences of which often filter into the daily classroom environment. Teachers, coaches, and parents are all of key importance in keeping students on the right road in making positive choices.

This study illustrates that building the relationship, including recognizing and respecting cultural and gender differences, are critical for successful mentoring. Crutcher (2007) recommends setting aside one to three hours per week for mentoring sessions, planning activities with your mentee in advance, placing these events on your calendar, and sharing this with your mentee so they can look forward to this dedicated time with their mentor.

Although having similar cultural and social background characteristics as your mentee can be helpful, Crutcher (2007) emphasizes that if it is not always possible, other strategies can help
overcome the differences. Moreover, building a successful relationship takes commitment and time; mentoring sessions must occur on a regular, consistent basis. Review of the literature provided evidence that building a relationship is essential to successful mentorships. Building a good relationship means taking time to get to know your mentee and showing interest in his or her well-being. The relationship is built by a minimum of regular weekly sessions as well as conveying genuine interest in students and their success (Campbell-Whatley, 2001).

The purpose of this research study was to identify and explore effective mentoring programs, strategies, and implementation methods for potential adoption in middle schools. The researcher explored the effectiveness of the current student mentoring program, seeking to find solutions to improve current practice. Based on this study and the review of literature, the following recommendations are made.

1. Have students share their positive experiences with mentors to illustrate the impact the mentors may have on their lives.
2. Conduct a workshop for all staff to brief them on guidelines of how to be a good mentor and make a difference in a child’s life.
3. Each subsequent year, conduct this workshop for all new staff.
4. Have a positive share moment with mentors at staff meetings once a month and during team meetings to keep an active awareness of the importance of mentoring and intervention for students at risk. This can be a reminder to those who do not currently serve as mentors and perhaps help spark interest for everyone to be more involved in their students’ lives.
5. Include weekly or monthly reminders on the school webpage or staff weekly announcements.
6. At the end of the year, have mentors and mentees reflect on the year’s experiences, sharing what was positive and how they plan to change their strategies to be a better mentor next year.

As Webster (2005) suggests, effective characteristics of successful mentor/mentee relationships includes same gender pairs, establishing positive relationships, encouraging and setting attainable goals, meeting regularly, and celebrating successes. As middle school professionals, we believe that every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. A major key to educating our students and helping them navigate through the difficult teen years is to have a caring adult who spends time with them, develops a positive mentoring relationship, and becomes an advocate for their success.

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