The Impact of Mentoring on Academic Achievement of At-risk Youth

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Planned mentoring programs have flourished as one possible solution to the problems affecting youth. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted evaluating mentoring programs in spite of the generally accepted belief that only positive effects can result from their implementation. The present study examined the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth involved in Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Academic achievement tests were individually administered to 12 boys in the treatment group (i.e., had a mentor) and 13 boys in a control group (i.e., were on a waiting list to receive a mentor) pre- and post-test over a nine month period. Results indicated that boys in the treatment group made significantly higher academic gains than the control group, even after controlling for ability. Implications of these results are discussed.

Mentoring programs have burgeoned in the past decade. The programs have been touted as solutions to various problems affecting youth, such as increased drug and alcohol use, teenage pregnancy, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and increase in juvenile crime. Because at-risk youth are more likely to experience failure in school or drop out, school psychologists, educators, counselors, and parents continue to look for effective interventions for school-related problems affecting at-risk youth. Proponents of mentoring programs hypothesize that mentoring programs could be part of the answer to these problems; however, little research has been conducted evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring programs.

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At-risk Youth

The term "at risk" youth encompasses a wide range of definitions. Kazdin (1993) stated that at-risk referred to the "increased likelihood over base rates in the population that a particular outcome will occur" (p.129). He referred to at-risk behaviors as those activities in which youth engage that increase the likelihood of adverse psychological, social, and health consequences. Dryfoos (1990) defined the term as applying to young people who are at risk for not maturing into responsible adults.

Resnick and Burt (1996) offered a more detailed definition by stating that youth can be defined as at risk because they engaged in risky behavior (e.g., early sexual behavior, truancy, tobacco/alcohol/drug use, running away from home/foster home, associating with delinquent peers). Exposure to certain environments may place a child at risk, and these environments or situations included poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, and family dysfunction (e.g., abusive/neglectful caretakers, out of home placement, and single parent homes). Dryfoos (1990) reported statistics on the number of youth who are in categories of risk. Among the approximately 28 million adolescents in the United States, 10% or 2.8 million were at very high risk; 15% or 4.2 million were at high; 25% or 7 million were at moderate risk (engaged in only one problem behavior); and 50% were at low or no risk.

As previously stated, at-risk youth are more susceptible to school failure. In one study, Nunn and Parish (1992) found that at-risk students had a history of unexcused absences and tardiness, were significantly below average in school performance, had behavioral and disciplinary problems, had less self-confidence as a learner, had a locus of control that was more externally oriented, and desired a more informal and non-traditional approach to learning. In another study, Dryfoos (1990) reported that at least seven million young people were behind their expected grade level in school and about 14% of every class did not graduate from high school. From this information, Dryfoos asserted that there were several major predictors of school failure and dropping out of school. These factors included: race and ethnicity, low expectations, low grades, low test scores, truancy, retention in early grades, family in poverty, low parental education, and early involvement in other high risk behaviors.

The above mentioned data indicated a strong relationship between at-risk youth and lower academic achievement. At-risk youth are at a sub-
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stantially higher risk of school failure and dropping out; therefore, it be-
comes imperative to implement and evaluate programs that might be effec-
tive in assisting at-risk youth overcome these obstacles. Mentoring pro-
grams appear to offer one possible solution to the myriad of problems at-
risk youth face.

Mentoring

While many youth mentoring programs have emerged since the late
1980's, the concept of mentoring has a long history. Freedman (1993) de-
scribed the traditional concept of mentoring as older men assisting boys
with learning a trade or skill. Bronfenbrenner provided a more useful and
contemporary definition of mentoring. Mentoring was defined as “a one-
to-one relationship between a pair of unrelated individuals, usually of dif-
ferent ages and is developmental in nature...a mentor is an older, more
experienced person who seeks to develop the character and competence of
a younger person” (cited in Freedman, 1993, p.31).

Mentoring can be described by two types: natural mentoring and
planned mentoring (Floyd, 1993). Natural mentoring occurs through
friendship, teaching, coaching, and counseling. Traditionally, certain insti-
tutions such as families, churches, neighborhoods, and schools have pro-
vided opportunities for natural mentoring. These institutions have changed
and thus reduced the ability of adults to provide assistance and guidance
to youth. Specifically, there are fewer adults in families because of the
increase in single-parent homes and many extended family members do
not live in the same town. Neighborhoods have changed and neighbors
tend to keep more to themselves. In addition, higher teacher/student ratios
exist in public schools (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 1995). Because of
the decline in natural mentoring, planned mentoring programs have
emerged.

The theory of planned youth mentoring programs is that mentoring
can be implemented systematically. Planned mentoring occurs through
structured programs in which an adult and a youth are selected and
matched through formal processes. The purpose of the programs is to pro-
vide at-risk youth with assistance and guidance to enable them to grow
into responsible adults, and to fill the gap created by the diminished op-
portunity for natural mentoring (Freedman, 1993). A rapid increase has
occurred in mentoring programs, with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America and its local affiliates being the oldest and probably best known of them.

Evaluation of mentoring programs is imperative to determine if they offer a possible solution to the problems affecting at-risk youth. Flaxman (1992) stated that mentoring programs should be evaluated for both their process and impact; however, only a few studies have been completed. Possible reasons for the lack of research are that most program administrators would rather use money and staff resources to provide more services than to complete an evaluation, many programs have not been in operation very long, and potential outcomes are difficult to quantify. Research has focused more on the process of mentoring (e.g., Mecartney, Styles, & Morrow, 1994; Schneider, 1995; Slicker & Palmer, 1993; Styles & Morrow, 1992; and Tierney & Branch, 1992), especially the formation of the relationships, than the impact of the mentoring.

Only one comprehensive impact study related to mentoring and at-risk youth has been conducted. Tierney et al. (1995) reported positive results in the areas of decreasing alcohol and drug use, improving peer relationships, and improving parent/child relationships. The authors, however, strongly cautioned that the "report does not provide evidence that any type of mentoring will work, but that mentorship programs that facilitate the specific types of relationships observed in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program work" (p.51). This type of relationship was a one-to-one friendship of a child with an unrelated adult that focused on friendship rather than any specific goals and the relationship received assistance and supervision from program staff.

*Mentoring and Academic Achievement*

Research on the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth has been conducted with conflicting results. Torrance (1984) conducted a longitudinal study of 220 students and found that those with mentors completed more years of education. More specifically, men with a mentor completed 17.8 years compared to 15.8 years of education for men without a mentor. Women with a mentor completed 18.1 years compared to 14.9 years for women without a mentor. A major limitation of this study was that the participants were mostly middle class and would not be defined as at-risk.
Slicker and Palmer (1993) evaluated the impact of a school-based mentoring program on 86 at-risk tenth grade students. The initial results indicated no differences in the dropout rate or grade point average between the treatment and control groups. When the differences between those students who were effectively mentored versus those who were ineffectively mentored were evaluated, they found that effectively mentored students had a lower dropout rate than ineffectively mentored students. Effective mentoring was defined by self-report from the student receiving the mentoring. Although differences were found in dropout rates, they were not found for grade point averages.

McPartland and Nettles (1991) evaluated the academic outcomes of middle school students who were involved in Project Raise, a well-financed, multi-faceted, structured program in Baltimore, Maryland, designed to provide mentors and advocates to very high risk children. One of the major goals of the program was improving academic progress. The researchers compared participants in Project Raise with non-participants from the same school. They found two statistically significant positive effects for students involved in the program. First, there was a reduction of nearly 3% in the school absence rate of youths involved in the program when compared to students in the same school, who did not have a mentor. The authors noted that the absence rate of participants in the program was still higher than the overall district average. Second, students involved in Project Raise received better grades on their report cards than other students at their schools did. Once again these grades were still below the district average. Additional findings indicated that students' participation in Project Raise had no impact on promotion rates and no impact on achievement, measured by scores on the reading and mathematics sections of the California Achievement Test. The study by McPartland and Nettles is significant because it was one of the first to use comparison groups and statistical tests to evaluate the students' school outcomes after they were involved in a well-financed, structured mentor program.

The study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters by Tierney et al. (1995) evaluated the effectiveness of mentors on academic achievement for 959 youths involved in eight Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs (487 youths were in the treatment group and 472 youths were in the control group). Those involved in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs were significantly less likely to skip classes or days of school. The students who had mentors skipped 52% fewer days and 37% fewer classes. The impact was greater
for girls in that Little Sisters skipped 84% fewer days of school than did girls in the control group. An additional finding was that girls in the treatment group (i.e., had a mentor) reported 3% better grades than girls in the control group.

Relatedly, Tiemey et al. (1995) demonstrated that treatment group members felt more confident of their ability to complete their schoolwork than did control group members and minority girls were most positively impacted. The study also investigated other school-related outcomes such as hours spent each week reading and doing homework, number of times youth visited a college and went to a library, and the number of books read, and found no overall statistically significant differences between the control and treatment group members.

To summarize, the research on the impact of planned mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth had varied results. School absence rates and dropout rates did decline. However, promotion rates and scores on a standardized achievement test did not improve significantly. Also, the effect of mentoring on grade point average showed conflicting results. McPartland and Nettles (1991) found significant improvement, while Slicker and Palmer (1993) did not.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth. Specifically, the question was whether involvement in a well-established mentoring program, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, had a significant impact on the academic achievement of at-risk youth, as measured by a individually administered standardized achievement instrument. The hypothesis was that at-risk youth, which have mentors, would show greater improvement in academic achievement than at-risk youth who do not have mentors. Mentors provide the extra, individual attention that at-risk youth are missing. Additionally, they provide a positive role model for the child. These conditions help to reduce some of the academic risk factors that these youths encounter. It is unlikely that mentoring can eliminate all academic risks; however, it may decrease some of them, which would lead to improvement in academic achievement.

The current study was important because there are few impact studies on mentoring and the previous impact studies had several limitations. One
of the limitations of prior research was the use of grade point average as the measure of achievement. Grades are subjective and do not always accurately reflect achievement. Another limitation was that youth self-report was utilized. Self-report measures can provide insight into youth’s perception; however, they may not measure academic achievement. Another shortcoming was that a group administered achievement instrument was used. Individual achievement scores were not addressed, particularly in the impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from an established mentoring program, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Midlands. This agency was chosen because it has well defined rules and policies, a long history of operation, casework staff to monitor and support the established matches, and a group large enough from which to obtain a sample. Thus, the process components of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Midlands program were well established and the impact could be assessed. Participants were recruited over a period of four months. The treatment group participants were recruited at agency events. The researcher approached all boys at the events and explained the study. All boys, except three, agreed to participate. The parent or guardian of each boy was contacted to explain the purpose of the study, and to gain her initial verbal consent. Written parent consent and youth assent were obtained before the initial assessment. Control group participants were recruited at program orientation meetings and through telephone calls. The orientation meetings yielded five participants (a total of ten parents were approached). The remainder of the control group was obtained through telephone solicitation. Two of the boys who were contacted over the phone did not want to participate. Recruitment for the control group continued until it had the same number of participants as the treatment group.

The treatment group consisted of boys who had a mentor, and the control group was comprised of boys without mentors, who had been accepted into the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program but were waiting to be assigned a volunteer. The boys were on the waiting list an average of fif-
teen months. The groups did not contain any girls because they were not on the waiting list over two months; thus, they were paired with a volunteer prior to the end of the study. Participants in the treatment group ranged in age from 9.11 to 15.8 (M = 11.9) and participants in the control group ranged in age from 7.6 to 15.9 (M = 10.4). The ethnic distribution was 92% Caucasian and 8% Hispanic in the treatment group, and 77% Caucasian, 15% African-American, and 8% Hispanic in the control group.

Initially, the control and treatment groups had 17 participants. During the posttest, the size was reduced to 12 participants in the treatment group and 13 participants in the control group. The reasons for attrition in the treatment group were: out of state residential placement for the child; the remarriage of a mother; child and parent moved out of state; and match discontinued voluntarily by mentor and youth. One participant was excluded from the treatment group because he met with his volunteer only one to two times a month. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program recommends weekly contact of two to four hours between the child and volunteer and the criteria for being in the treatment group was for the youth and mentor to meet an average of three to four times a month (M = 3.5). The reasons for attrition, in the control group, were: youth was matched during waiting period; child no longer eligible due to mother's marriage; child and parent moved out of state; and mother removed child's name from waiting list.

All participants had the risk factor of being from a single parent home (a requirement to participate in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program). Each youth had to have an additional risk factor to participate in this study. The researcher through interview determined this with the parent or guardian of each participant. The risk factors were: truancy/running away; living in poverty; out of home placement; associating with delinquent peers; tobacco/alcohol/drug use by youth; history of physical/emotional/sexual abuse; family history of domestic violence; family history of substance abuse; physical disability; involvement in juvenile justice system; academic problems (behind in grade level, special education placement); and frequent school absences/detentions/suspensions.

Program Description

The national office developed standards and required procedures for screening the volunteers and youth, and standards for the creation and su-
The screening procedures for volunteers included a minimum of three written personal references, background investigation (police check and child abuse registry check), individual interview, and home visit. The screening for youth included parent/guardian interview, child interview, school report, and home visit. After the matches were made, the volunteer and child met weekly for two to four hours. The volunteers make a yearly commitment to the program, however, most of them continue the relationship beyond the first year. The volunteer and child participated in a variety of activities. The purpose of the relationship is to establish a friendship; therefore, the interests of the volunteer and child in conjunction with parent input determine the activities. Examples of activities included going to a movie, playing games, working on homework, talking on the phone, and other various activities that friends do with each other. The agency also sponsored activities that the volunteer and child attended together which included miniature golfing, watching a baseball game, bowling, going to the planetarium, and seeing a play. The ultimate purpose of the match is to provide the child with weekly, ongoing contact from a positive role model.

Case managers supervised the matched to ensure that the requirements of the program components were followed. The nature of the supervision included contacts with the parent, youth, and volunteer within two weeks of the match, and monthly contact during the first year of the match. After the first year, quarterly contacts were made with all parties. The agency also provided training to all volunteers and families.

Materials

Each participant was administered the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (K-TEA) Brief Form. The Brief Form was chosen because it provides a composite score as well as scores on three subtests: Reading, Mathematics, and Spelling. Additionally, the test can be administered in approximately thirty minutes as compared to sixty to seventy-five minutes for the complete K-TEA. Doll (1994) stated that the reliability of the subtests of the Brief Form is adequate at .85 and the composite score has higher reliability. Sattler (1994) stated that the K-TEA Brief Form is a well-normed standardized test of educational achievement that provides reliable and valid scores for the basic achievement areas covered in school.
Participants were also administered the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (K-BIT) in order to control for the impact of cognitive ability when assessing achievement. Miller (1995) stated that the K-BIT is a psychometrically sound measure of verbal, nonverbal, and composite intelligence with a test-retest reliability of .94 and a .78 correlation with the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition. Young (1995) stated that the K-BIT is a well-normed, standardized individual intelligence test that is useful when only a gross measure of intellectual functioning is required.

Procedure

The K-TEA Brief Form and the K-BIT were individually administered to each participant at the beginning of the study. The K-TEA Brief Form was also administered eight to nine months after the first administration ($M = 8.75$ for the treatment group and $M = 8.69$ for the control group). Due to possible variation in the amount of time a child spent with the volunteer, an assessment of this factor was also completed. During the follow-up phase, the child and parent were interviewed about the amount of time the child spent with his mentor.

Data Analyses

The present study is categorized as a quasi-experimental design since assignment to the control and treatment groups was not random. One of the major limitations of this type of design is that group differences on the posttest may be attributed to preexisting group differences, rather than to a treatment effect. One possible difference is intellectual functioning level. Therefore an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with cognitive ability score as the covariate, was used to interpret the data. The ANCOVA evaluated whether the posttest mean of the treatment group was significantly different from the posttest mean of the control group after taking into account the preexisting differences in cognitive ability. The independent variable was having a mentor and the dependent variables were the composite score, reading score, math score, and spelling score from the K-TEA Brief Form. The concomitant variable was cognitive ability, as measured by the K-BIT. Significance levels were set at $p < .05$. 
Results

A test of the linear relationship between the covariate (K-BIT score) and the composite scores produced a significant result, $F(1,24) = 13.38$, $p<.001$. Further testing revealed a significant result between the covariate and the reading scores, $F(1,24) = 15.47$, $p<.05$ and a significant result between the covariate and the math scores, $F(1,24) = 10.25$, $p<.05$. However, there was not a significant result between the covariate and the spelling scores $F(1,24) = 2.60$.

The adjusted mean scores of the two groups were computed after controlling for the covariate (see Table 1). Results indicated a significant difference in the composite scores of the two groups, $F(1,24) = 4.85$, $p<.05$. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the reading scores, $F(1,24) = 5.85$, $p<.05$, and the math scores $F(1,24) = 4.87$, $p<.05$. However, there was not a significant difference in the spelling scores $F(1,24) = .084$. In summary, the effect of having a mentor significantly improved performance in academic achievement, except spelling.

Table 1

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Note. Group 1 = treatment group and Group 2 = control group

The K-TEA Brief Form has a standard score of 100 and a standard deviation of 15.
Discussion

The results of this study indicated that having a mentor positively impacted the academic achievement of at-risk youth. Boys in the treatment group performed significantly better than boys in the control group, as measured by the composite score of the K-TEA Brief Form. In addition, the treatment group performed better in reading and math than the control group. No differences were found between the groups in spelling.

The present study can be viewed as an initial exploration into the impact of mentoring programs on academic achievement. Participation in a mentoring program that has a well-established foundation appears to be effective in increasing academic achievement when compared to no involvement. Consistent, positive one-to-one attention from an adult role model may have the potential to reduce some of the academic dangers that at-risk youth encounter.

This study's results were exciting due to the nature of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Achievement scores increased in this study without a specific emphasis on academics from the volunteers. Their purpose is to provide a one-to-one friendship between a child and an adult volunteer. Big Brothers/Big Sisters does not closely monitor academics except for graduation rate. The friendships are built around a social relationship rather than a tutor or teacher approach. It should be noted that the volunteers could assist with homework but that this is not a focus of the program. The volunteers may have encouraged the children to attend school and provided verbal support for academic success. The adult's primary role, however, is to support the child, not to explicitly change behaviors such as improving academic scores. Therefore, it is very interesting that their general supportive friendship approach may have a secondary benefit of increasing academic success.

One reason that mentoring from Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Midlands demonstrated success may be attributed to the well-established infrastructures that screen, match, and support relationships. This infrastructure and ongoing supervision of the adult/youth relationship appear essential to the success of the friendship, as was discussed in the literature review. The improvement of the achievement scores may not have occurred if the agency did not have the standards and operations that promote successful relationships.
An additional possible explanation for the results is the unique measure of academic achievement utilized. The present study used an individually administered standardized achievement test, as compared to prior studies which used grade point average or group administered tests. Individual assessment is more sensitive to change and is less subjective than other academic measures. Additionally, when comparing the groups on achievement, this study controlled for cognitive ability, which had not been done in previous studies. Therefore, the current results may be more valid than previous studies.

One area to note is that the treatment group had a significant increase in all areas except spelling. A possible explanation is that spelling is a measure of rote memory, which shows improvement with practice. Since the boys did not have specific practice with the spelling words, the scores did not show improvement. It is also interesting to note that cognitive ability did not have an interaction effect with the spelling scores. This result may reinforce the argument that spelling ability has a nominal connection to intellectual ability.

Implications for Practice

The literature supports the notion that the process of the mentoring program needs to be firmly entrenched before the impact of the program can be evaluated. Mental health and school personnel, who may consider implementing a mentoring program, need to be mindful of the components that are necessary for a successful program. These components include the following: standards and procedures for screening the volunteers and youth, procedures for the creation of the relationship and ongoing supervision of the relationship, clearly defined expectations of all parties, consistent contact between the youth and the adult, ongoing training for volunteers, and program staff to operate and oversee the program.

Limitations

The ability to generalize the results of this study were restricted because of some limitations. The major limitation of this study was that assignment to the treatment and control groups was not random. Random assignment is preferred because the differences between the control and treatment groups can be confidently linked to the intervention (i.e., having
a mentor). However, there was an ethical concern of random assignment. If the groups were randomly assigned, the control youth would not have been able to receive a mentor until the end of the study, which would have been at least ten months. Non-random assignment was used, which limits the validity of the study.

Another limitation of the study is that the sample was small and primarily included only Caucasian boys. Minority youth were not represented in enough size to draw any meaningful conclusions on the impact of mentoring for minority youth. Additionally, girls were not included in the sample. This study also did not investigate other possible factors (e.g., socio-economic status, age, and additional academic support) that can impact academic achievement.

_Suggestions for Future Research_

First and most importantly, the results of this study need to be replicated in other sites to determine generalizability. Future research should also examine the effects of mentoring on the academic achievement of minority youth and girls. It would also be interesting to evaluate at what age mentoring has its greatest impact on academic achievement. A further area of research is looking at youth and volunteers personal characteristics that positively impact achievement. Since nonprofit agencies continue to compete for a limited amount of funds, it would also be beneficial to compare various mentoring programs. Research about the effectiveness of several mentoring programs could assist in resource allocation.

_Conclusion_

In summary, this study evaluated the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk boys. Youth continue to be exposed to a variety of situations that make them at-risk for academic failure. Results of this study indicate that having a mentor appears to positively affect this area. Boys who had consistent contact with an adult volunteer did better on the composite, reading, and math portions of an achievement test. The results are unique because the purpose of the relationship between the adult and child was friendship rather than the adult being a tutor. The results of this study are encouraging and reiterate the important work of Big
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Brothers/Big Sisters. Their program is an option to assist youth overcome some academic obstacles; however, due to the shortage of volunteers, boys continue to wait almost two years for a mentor. Mentoring programs, that are systematized similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters, might also demonstrate positive impact on academic achievement. This information is useful to school personnel who work with at-risk youth because it is another tool that can be used to help alleviate some of the achievement problems of at-risk youth.

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References


