Graduate Research Papers   Student Work

1996

Mentoring programs for at-risk youth

Carole M. Sandeen
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

Mentoring programs for at-risk youth

Abstract

"At-risk youth" is a term that is often used in different contexts. Youth who fall under the label of "at-risk" could be at risk for abusing illegal drugs and/or alcohol, breaking the law, committing suicide, engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior, or dropping out of school before they receive a high school diploma. According to Oakland (1992), the percentage of students dropping out of high school ranges from 17% to 25%. The reasons why some youth do not succeed in school and life are as numerous as the individuals themselves.

Mentoring Programs for At-Risk Youth

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Carole M. Sandeen
May 1996

This Research Paper by: Carole M. Sandeen

Entitled: MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts.

Terry Kottman

3-2-96

_____

Date Approved

_____

Director of Research Paper

Jeffrey S. Ashby

3/1/96

_____

Date Approved

_____

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

3.4.96

_____

Date Received

_____

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

"At-risk youth" is a term that is often used in different contexts. Youth who fall under the label of "at-risk" could be at risk for abusing illegal drugs and/or alcohol, breaking the law, committing suicide, engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior, or dropping out of school before they receive a high school diploma. According to Oakland (1992), the percentage of students dropping out of high school ranges from 17% to 25%. The reasons why some youth do not succeed in school and life are as numerous as the individuals themselves.

Concern about youth who are at risk of not graduating from high school is a serious issue for the United States, both socially and economically. In regards to social concerns, Capuzzi and Gross (1989) stated that youth who fail in school are limited in their potential for future well being. In regards to the economic concerns, Capuzzi and Gross (1989) also found that students who drop out of school weaken the economy since they are unprepared to work. This type of situation can place a burden on unemployment and welfare services. Compared with high school graduates, dropouts can expect to earn less: $226,000 for men and

$199,000 for women over a lifetime of earnings (Catterall, 1985).

There seems to be relative consistency in the definitions of the characteristics that serve as "red flags" or warning signs for youth who are "at-risk." According to Minga (1988), Grossnickle (1986), and Hahn (1987), warning signs that will be evident in the school setting include tardiness, absenteeism, acting out behaviors, lack of motivation, poor grades, truancy, failure of one or more grades, boredom with school, and failure to see the relevance of education to life experience. Youth who display such characteristics should be prime candidates for intervention programs which are designed to prevent youth from dropping out of school. Since youth represent the future, and graduating from high school may significantly help them have a positive future, what steps can be taken to combat this problem?

One step that can be taken to combat the problem for youth at risk of dropping out of high school is implementing an intervention such as pairing healthy adult mentors with "at-risk" youth. According to Slicker and Palmer (1993), the mentor is an adult role

model who serves as both a parent and a peer to the youth, while also acting as a teacher and advisor. Levinson (1978) stated that a mentor encourages, praises, and prods the mentee to bolster his or her sense of competence and self-concept. Williams and Kornblum (1985) stated that one of the key differences between successful and unsuccessful youth from lower income urban communities is that the youth who are successful have mentors. Lefkowitz (1986) and Anderson (1991) found supportive adults to be a vital influence with at-risk youth.

What is necessary to develop a mentoring program for youth at risk of not graduating from high school? This paper will attempt to answer that question by providing a discussion of (a) the characteristics of at-risk youth, (b) the characteristics of a mentor and the elements of a mentoring program, and (c) possible benefits incurred by youth who participate in mentoring programs. It will also contain a description of a research study designed to measure the efficacy of one mentoring program.

Characteristics of At-Risk Youth

There are many characteristics used to identify
and describe at-risk youth. According to Ingersoll and
Orr (1988), youth who fall into one at-risk category,
such as being sexually active or abusing substances,
are likely to fall into other at-risk categories. Low
academic achievement is a pervasive characteristic
among youth who are at risk of dropping out of high
school. Other characteristics of this population
include being older than one's peers in the same grade
and having an unfavorable attitude towards school
(Oakland, 1992). Oakland (1992) also stated that having
a police record, low attendance at school and frequent
school changes are characteristics of youth at risk of
dropping out of high school.

The students in this population have many needs
that school personnel can address. According to Slicker
and Palmer (1993), these needs include having teachers
who are supportive and encouraging, feeling as if they
are part of the school, and getting information about
resources available to them through personal contacts
with school personnel.

It is imperative for school personnel to know the

typical characteristics of at-risk youth so they can be identified and assisted with getting on the "right track." It is especially imperative to identify at-risk youth at an early age so that interventions can be used as soon as possible to prevent them from dropping out of high school. In identifying at-risk youth, caution must also be exercised to avoid negative labels which may lead to stereotyped youth, negative self-concepts, and lowered aspirations (Capuzzi & Gross, 1989).

While researching ways to identify youth at risk of dropping out of high school, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) studied sophomores at the high school level and then studied the same group two years later to determine reasons why one student dropped out but another did not. The behavior pattern of sophomores who eventually dropped out showed more disengagement from school than those who graduated. In the same research study, Ekstrom and his colleagues (1986) found that students who dropped out of high school expressed a more external locus of control than did students who continued in high school and graduate.

Characteristics of at-risk students are usually most apparent in the school setting. However, research

has shown that three other important elements influence
whether students decide to finish high school. These
three elements are: (a) characteristics present within
families, (b) acquisition of unusually early adult
roles by the students, and (c) peer and environmental
influences.

Family Background

It is not easily determined why certain students
are at risk of not graduating from high school and
other students will have very little difficulty
graduating. As stated earlier, one explanation for such
a decision may be influenced by their family
backgrounds. According to Patterson (1986), adolescents
who regularly engage in typical at-risk behaviors are
more likely to come from families with inept parenting
styles. Patterson (1986) defined inept parenting as
behavior demonstrated by parents who fail to enforce
discipline and fail to provide structure or support for
their children. Similarly, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack,
and Rock (1986) found that a lack of family involvement
was an important cause of school misbehavior and
academic problems. Ekstrom et al. (1986) also described
a lack of family involvement as providing few

educational supports at home and not assisting the students with their curriculum decisions.

Oakland (1992) found that, compared to those who graduate, students who leave school early are more likely to have been victims of physical abuse, incest, to have lived in foster homes, or to have divorced parents. Research has suggested that victims of abuse and those who receive little family support to succeed in high school have a higher rate of dropping out of high school.

Earlier Adult Roles

Another characteristic of youth who are at risk of dropping out of high school is that they acquire adult roles at an earlier age than youth who graduate from high school. Adolescents who acquire adult roles at a developmentally inappropriate age find that their roles as students decline in importance (Oakland, 1992). Taking on more adult responsibility at a young age may prompt those students to have lower achievement motivation and less involvement in extra-curricular activities. Acquiring an adult role at an earlier age does not allow youth to experience the necessary developmental learning that often occurs while

participating in extra-curricular activities. This experience might include learning how to set goals, learning the benefits of discipline, and experiencing an increase in one's level of self-confidence through achieving a goal.

Peer and Environmental Influences

Along with the influences of family, various influences of peers and the environment are also factors in youth at risk of not graduating from high school. Ingersoll and Orr (1988) stated that failure to establish workable social ties with peers is a major predictor of social and emotional maladjustment during adolescence and adulthood. At-risk behaviors such as teenage pregnancy, truancy, displaying acting out behaviors at school, or encounters with the law can be predictors of an adolescent's choice to drop out of high school. The more likely an adolescent's at-risk behavior is supported and expected by the peer group, the more likely the adolescent will engage in that behavior (Ingersoll & Orr, 1988). Therefore, a young person's peer group can be influential in his or her decision to not continue with school.

Environmental influences, such as stressful

events, can also play a part in an adolescent deciding
to not graduate from high school. Typical stressful
events for an adolescent may include school changes,
parent divorce, the remarriage of a parent, or the
death of a sibling or parent. According to Ingersoll
and Orr (1988), life transitions, both positive and
negative, can result in feelings of stress for an
individual. Each transitional event requires the
adolescent to make social and emotional adjustments.
How an individual reacts to a stressor is
individualized and therefore will vary depending on the
person.

Characteristics of Mentors and Mentoring Programs

One possible intervention to assist these at-risk
youth is to implement a mentoring program which would
include pairing at-risk youth with healthy adults.
Mentoring can be described as a relationship between an
older, more experienced person and an unrelated,
younger protege with the mentor providing guidance,
instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the
competence and character of the protege (Rhodes, 1994).

According to Alleman, Cochran, Doverspike, and
Newman (1984), characteristics of a mentoring

relationship include increasing the level of competence in youth by demonstrating trust and confidence in them, praising and encouraging the youth, and modeling desirable behaviors. According to Oakland (1992), successful mentoring programs have adults participating in them who have the ability to recognize and respond to students' social, emotional, and cognitive needs. In other words, effective mentoring programs enable students to learn how their needs can be met by using constructive means. Freedman and Jaffe (1993) stated that characteristics of successful mentoring programs include: (a) allowing the mentors to function autonomously, (b) focusing on the growth of the mentee rather than accomplishing tasks, and (c) providing support to the mentor by holding regular meetings organized by school personnel who coordinate the mentoring program to discuss common issues and therefore creating a "community" for the mentors. According to Bender (1993), the role of a mentor includes being a good listener, acting as a role model, being dependable, and practicing confidentiality when appropriate. Bender (1993) also stated that open communication is critical to a successful mentor/mentee

relationship.

According to research conducted by Freedman and Jaffe (1993), principles of programs which encourage the development of significant mentee/mentor relationships include: (a) consistent and regular meeting times for the youth and the mentor, (b) visits that are structured around a purposeful event, (c) weekly meeting times, and (d) patience with allowing the young person to open up and trust his or her mentor.

There are several reasons why mentoring programs can be a positive intervention for at-risk youth. According to Freedman & Jaffe (1993), who have researched mentoring programs for youth at risk of not graduating from high school, adolescents are segregated from adults while in school. This situation creates having few adult role models available. Freedman and Jaffe (1993) stated that an accumulation of longitudinal research has suggested that a relationship with an interested adult is a common factor among youth who achieve success despite growing up in disadvantaged and stressful circumstances. According to Rhodes (1994), mentors have the potential to modify or even

reverse the negative developmental trajectories of at-risk youth. Therefore, pairing a healthy adult with a youth at risk of not graduating from high school has potential for positive outcomes.

Research Support for the Efficacy of Mentoring Programs

Although there are many positive aspects of mentoring programs for at-risk youth, there seems to be a lack of empirical research supporting that the lives of those youth exposed to a mentoring program actually improve (Slicker and Palmer, 1993). There are, however, several research studies in the area of mentoring that used observational data to explore the effectiveness of mentoring programs.

In one of the only empirical studies of mentoring programs, Slicker and Palmer (1993) researched the effects of a mentoring program in Texas. The sample included 86 tenth grade students who were at risk for leaving high school prematurely. Criteria for the subjects identified for this research experiment included failure of two or more classes in the recent semester, scores lower than the 10th percentile on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, grade retention, and graduation from high school being unlikely because of a

low number of credits. The 86 students were divided into two groups. One group included those students who were most at-risk and met at least two of the experiment's criteria. The students who met at least two of the criteria were paired with adult mentors and placed in the researcher's experimental group. Those students who met fewer than two criteria for being at risk of dropping out of high school did not receive a mentor.

The mentors who participated were school personnel who volunteered for the project. Suggested mentoring activities included consistently meeting with the student three times each week during the six month experiment, recognizing the student's achievements, and remembering his or her birthday. The mentors were asked to keep a log to keep track of the type, frequency, and length of each mentoring activity.

Measures that were used in this experiment to show the level of success included the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS), grade point average, dropout status, and the mentors' logs. The PHCSCS was used to judge the level of improvement in the mentees' self-concept. Grade point average was

measured to determine the level of improvement within the students' course work. Dropout status was tracked to determine if mentoring at-risk students assisted them with deciding to continue with school. Lastly, mentors logged the frequency, type, and length of activities so that the integrity of the program could be evaluated.

An initial chi-square analysis of these measures found that except for the scores on the PHCSCS, there were no significant differences between the control group and the experimental group utilizing the various measures. Based on the students' evaluation of the mentoring experience and the written logs kept by the mentors, the researchers found that the quality of mentoring varied greatly among the participants. For the purpose of further analysis, the students who initially began in the experimental group were divided into two more groups: the effectively mentored (EM) group with nine students and the ineffectively mentored (IM) group with thirteen students. This determination was based on the students' evaluation of their mentoring experience.

According to this post-hoc analysis, 69% of the IM

students returned to school during the next academic year, whereas 100% of the students in the EM group returned to school. No significant differences were found in the scores of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. However, posttreatment statistically significant differences were found in the GPAs of students who were effectively mentored. This research demonstrated that academic achievement and school attendance can improve through a mentoring program, but the quality of the mentoring relationship (i.e. frequent and consistent routine meetings between the mentor and mentee) plays a vital aspect in whether or not at-risk students experience change.

Despite the lack of quantitative research in the area of mentoring at-risk youth, based on this study, Slicker and Palmer (1993) have suggested that a mentoring program which shows consistency can be effective in helping at-risk youth to improve their academic achievement. Slicker and Palmer's (1993) study has also supported the idea that the integrity of the program is what will determine the level of success experienced by the youth at risk of not graduating from high school.

Benefits of Mentoring Youth at Risk

Youth who are at risk of not graduating from high school have often experienced hardships such as inept parenting, lack of family involvement in their education, divorce in the family, or possibly even an abusive parent. Despite the "tough" background typical of at-risk youth, pairing them with a healthy adult in a mentoring program that demonstrates consistency can be beneficial. One empirical study (Slicker and Palmer, 1993) has demonstrated that mentoring programs which include consistent meeting times for the mentor and mentee, structured visits, and patience for trust to occur within the relationship can assist the process of a successful mentoring relationship. Successful mentoring relationships can also mean improvement with a student's academic achievement and a brighter future for that student. According to Freedman and Jaffe (1993), mentoring programs have a chance to be successful simply on the basis that youth value the chance to talk with someone who is not a parent or a teacher, who is not judgmental, and who is paying close attention to them.

The Committee for Economic Development, as cited

in Smith and Lincoln (1988), found that for every $1
citizens of the United States now invest to help
students who are at risk early on, $4.74 can be saved
in the costs of remedial education, welfare, and crime.
Therefore, helping youth who are at risk of not
graduating from high school makes economic as well as
humanistic sense. By rising to meet this challenge, a
more humane society can be created in which all
individuals are empowered to reach their full potential
and become contributing members of society.

References

Alleman, E., Cochran, J., Doverspike, J., & Newman, I. (1984). Enriching mentoring relationships. The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 62, 329-332.

Anderson, E. (1991). Neighborhood effects on teenage pregnancy. In C. Jencks & P.E. Peterson (Eds.), The urban underclass (pp. 375-398). Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Bender, I. (1993). Mentoring: The first stages of program development. Paper presented at a Manning Junior-Senior High Inservice, Manning, IA.

Capuzzi, D., & Gross, D. R. (Eds.). (1989). Youth at risk: A resource for counselors, teachers, and parents. Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling & Development.

Catterall, J. S. (1985). On the social costs of dropping out of school. Stanford, CA: Center for Educational Research at Stanford.

Ekstrom, R. E., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). Who drops out of school and why: Findings from a national study. Teachers College Record, 87, 356-373.

Freedman, M., & Jaffe, N. (1993). Elder mentors:

Giving schools a hand. NASSP Bulletin, 76, 22-28.

    Grossnickle, D. R. (1986). High school dropouts: Causes, consequences, and cure. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

    Hahn, A. (1987). Reaching out to America's dropouts: What to do? Phi Delta Kappan, 69, 256-263.

    Ingersoll, G. M., & Orr, D. P. (1988). Adolescents at risk. Counseling & Human Development, 20, 1-8.

    Lefkowitz, B. (1986). Tough change: Growing up on your own in America. New York: Free Press.

    Levinson, D. (1978). The seasons of a man's life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

    Minga, T. (1988). States and the "at-risk" issues said aware but still "failing." Education Week, 8, 1-16.

    Oakland, T. (1992). School dropouts: Characteristics and prevention. Applied and Preventive Psychology, 1, 201-208.

    Patterson, G. R. (1986). Performance models for antisocial boys. American Psychologist, 41, 432-444.

    Rhodes, J. E. (1994). Older and wiser: Mentoring relationships in childhood and adolescence. The Journal of Primary Prevention, 14, 187-196.

Slicker, E. K., & Palmer, D. J. (1993). Mentoring at-risk high school students: Evaluation of a school-based program. The School Counselor, 40, 327-334.

Smith, R. C., & Lincoln, C. A. (1988). Americans' shame, American's hope: Twelve million youth at risk. Chapel Hill, NC: MDC.

Torrance, E. (1983). Role of mentors in creative achievement. The Creative Child and Adult Quarterly, 8, 8-15.

Williams, T. M., & Kornblum, W. (1985). Growing up Poor. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.