Mentoring: An Intervention for Urban Schools

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- This article reviews the literature on mentoring. Implementing an effective mentoring program, career development, at-risk youths, and special education will be explored along with limitations and implications mentoring programs have on educators in urban settings.

Introduction

Mentoring is increasingly appealing for urban schools solving the problem of wayward youths. The popularity of mentoring programs continues to grow due to the positive effects reported by mentors and mentees (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1993). According to King, Vidourek, Davis, and McClellan (2002) students who develop positive relationships with an adult mentor show an increase in their sense of family connectedness. Students, especially at-risk students, need adult relationships (VanderVen, 2004), and mentoring programs appear to be a solution for disconnected youths who have parents who are either overworked or have “checked out”. As society exposes youths to negative images promoting sex, violence, and monetary gains “by any means necessary,” the mentor could possibly serve as a grounding force for children. Youths show a need for more education on practical life skills to combat the poor performance of urban students (Shorr & Hon, 2000). Additionally, natural or planned, mentoring seems to be a panacea for the plight of misdirected or disconnected urban youths.

Considering the potential benefits, how could mentoring programs serve as a resource for educators in urban school settings? This article will address the characteristics of effective mentoring programs, as well as an exploration of how mentoring influences career development. The effects of mentoring on different populations such as at-risk youths and special education students will also be explored. A thorough discussion, which includes the limitations of mentoring, will be provided.

Characteristics of Effective Programs

Research has identified distinct characteristics in effective mentoring programs. These characteristics include: (1) a well coordinated, supervised, and purposeful program; (2) providing quality training for the mentors; (3) receiving support from the school or community; (4) possessing strong commitments from the mentors; (5) and identifying specific goals for the mentoring experience (Ryan, Whittaker, & Pinckney, 2002; Terry, 1999). Ryan et al. (2002) provided a guideline to implement a quality program. These guidelines, which create a well coordinated foundation are:

1. Identify program goals
2. Designate a program coordinator
3. Select students to be mentees
4. Recruit and select mentors
5. Match mentees and mentors
6. Gain parent permission
7. Provide education for mentors
8. Provide space and resources for mentoring
9. Promote communication among participants
10. Monitor effectiveness of program

By implementing the above mentioned steps, programs become more cohesive and effective for the participants. Additionally, these steps lead a program to better organization, supervision, and the development of a clear purpose.

Another characteristic of an effective mentoring program is the quality of training provided to mentors. Quality training for mentors resulted in the positive effects described by Bein (1999), such as a boost in mentee’s self-esteem. These effects are a result of a mentoring program with positive and reliable mentors. The training
provides mentors with the necessary skills to be successful.

Receiving support from the school or community is vital to the effectiveness of the school’s mentoring program (Terry, 1999). Terry described a program model with this type of support called the Combination Community/School mentoring program. This program, which utilizes mentors from the school as well as the community as participants, had a positive evaluation by the school and community. This example of collaborative support led to the longevity of the mentoring relationships, which lasted a year and were renewed for another year long commitment.

In addition to support from the school and community a program needs clear and distinguishable goals for the participants in order to be successful. This will help the program avoid the pitfall of trying to take on challenges that are clearly out of reach, yet prevalent, in urban settings such as poverty or homelessness (Bennetts, 2003). A mentoring program cannot be a panacea for all the societal ills a youth may face, despite the positive effects the program has on the participants (Bennetts, 2003). Overall mentoring appears to be positive, but the positive effects must be kept in perspective.

**Mentoring and Career Development**

Linnehan (2003) reported that the positive relationships formed between youths and adult mentors in a work environment may assist in students making the transition from school to work. Mentoring introduces youths to different professions and the world of work in general (Shorr & Hon, 2000). Mentoring has been known to uncover “hidden talents” in youth that positively contribute to career choice (McCluskey et al., 2004). For students who come from backgrounds that place them at a disadvantage through limited knowledge about career options, mentoring levels the playing field (Shorr & Hon, 2000). Most importantly, hard to reach students found encouragement from long lasting and trusting mentoring relationships (McCluskey et al., 2004).

Mentors are not the only ones that benefit. Educational professions are enhanced by the skills learned through mentoring and become more acclimated to working with students in urban settings (McCluskey et al., 2004; Sawyer, 2001). Moreover, the mentoring relationship has served as a way to recruit minorities into education as a profession. Through youth-to-youth mentoring experiences, students also were able to explore the idea of choosing education as a profession, and experience first hand the psychic rewards brought about by mentoring (Sawyer, 2001). Thus, the mentoring relationship can assist mentees in career exploration and help mentors (educators) learn effective ways to approach the “troubled-talented” students that may fill the halls of urban school settings (McCluskey et al., 2004).

**Mentoring and At-risk Youths**

An important urban school population that benefits from mentoring are at-risk youth. One of the broad purposes of mentoring is to aid with the academic achievement of youths (OERI, 1993). Schools that implement mentoring programs try to combat low achievement of students, particularly those who are considered to be at-risk. Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001) reported that “...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” (p.238). Evidence also was found in a grant funded mentoring program called the Governor’s Mentoring Initiative implemented in the State of Florida. Data gathered from the Seminole County School District, which serves over 63,000 students (Seminole County Public Schools [SCPS] 2005), yielded the following data that provided some support for the role a mentoring program can have on improved academic success of youth:

- There was a 67% increase in students attendance
- 71% of students improvement academically
- 61% of students had fewer discipline referrals

King et al. (2002) also support the assumption that mentoring aids in students improving academically (2002). They found an increase in the grades of student participants in mentoring programs. In a study performed by Keating, Tomishima, Foster, and Alessandri (2002) at-risk youths were identified by concerned professionals and placed in a mentoring program as an intervention. They reported a decrease in problem behaviors in the youth who participate in the mentoring program. Whether the relationship is through a mentoring program or a natural mentoring relationship, youth can benefit from a positive adult relationship (VanderVen, 2004).
Mentoring is not only for students who are at-risk. It can also empower the student who has already been identified as having certain strengths. Students who are identified as being gifted and learning disabled benefit from a mentoring relationship because it helps to promote their self-esteem (Shevitz, Weinfeld, Jeweler, & Barnes-Robinson, 2003). Talented students with learning disabilities often experience a masking of their talents by their learning disability. A mentor can provide those students with opportunities to increase their confidence and become more aware of their talents and areas where they might need assistance (Shevitz, et al., 2003).

Mentoring aids with the development of giftedness in other ways as well. Students who are growing up in economically disadvantaged situations are at times not recognized as being gifted or talented. Hebert (2002) reports mentees can have a more hopeful outlook on their future when they have relationships with adults who see past the mentee’s economic and social situations, and recognize and foster the mentee’s talents.

Discussion
Mentoring cannot be seen as a cure-all, as noted by Bennetts (2003). The concept of mentoring has come under fire for different reasons. However, it is important to remember that mentoring can have some negative effects, particularly if a program lacks the following five factors that contribute to program effectiveness: (1) well coordinated, supervised, and purposeful; (2) providing quality training for the mentors; (3) receiving support from the school or community; (4) possessing strong commitments from the mentors; and (5) identifying specific goals for the mentoring experience (Terry, 1999; Ryan, Whittaker, & Pinckney, 2002). The varied value systems and theories of mentoring should be considered when considering the use of a mentoring program with youths. But, it should not add to a deepening of the misunderstanding of mentoring programs and what these programs can accomplish (Gibb, 2003).

Urban schools are facing unique challenges in serving today’s student. Mentoring provides the urban educator with an effective intervention for the student who may be from a diverse background, at-risk, or in special education. With the thrust in college and career planning occurring in schools, mentoring offers the urban student with additional opportunities to explore his or her options and make more informed educational and occupational choices. The urban educator needs to recognize the limitations of mentoring and the areas that, although crippling in the school system (i.e. homelessness or poverty), are not appropriate to combat through mentoring relationships (Bennets, 2003). There are successful group mentoring models that can be utilized by an urban educator to assist with the burnout and the low number of mentors available to work with students in a one on one mentoring relationship (Utsey, 2003). Being creative in approach and following an organized and meaningful framework to execute a group mentoring model would prove useful for the urban educator. It is also important to consider the role of the school counselor in implementing mentoring programs in the urban school setting. Educators in urban settings possess the opportunity to drive home the ways in which mentoring can aid the youths they serve by expanding upon the ways in which mentoring is being used. With the high number of youths in single parent homes or lacking parental involvement, a need exists for interventions that will model healthy behaviors through positive one-to-one relationships between adults and youths. Another area for exploration is the concept of ‘health and wellness’ for youth and the effects of promoting this concept in a preventive manner. School counselors are positioned and trained to ensure that the benefits of mentoring reach all students regardless of their achievement level. District support increases the likelihood that students in all types of schools, especially urban school settings, gain the positive benefits of mentoring relationships. Mentoring appears to have a number of good consequences for participants. However, some limitations exist. Students may be harmed more than helped by poor mentoring experiences. Mentoring relationships that are short in duration could be problematic for youths, due to a lack of commitment on the part of the mentor. Other limitations include but are not limited to, lack of financial support for mentoring programs, and a dearth in the amount of volunteers for mentoring programs. Urban educators must emphasize the quality that must be maintained in mentoring relationships thus ensuring that the experience is characterized by consistency and longevity. Additional research in the area of mentoring can further uncover the direct effects that mentoring has on academic and interpersonal improvement and identify other negative effects as well as the reasons behind them.
References