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Cross-age peer mentoring for elementary students with behavioral and academic risk factors

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ABSTRACT

In many cases, the school failure cycle begins in elementary school for students with specific risk factors. Young students with learning difficulties and behavioral problems require a timely and sufficient program to prevent poor school outcomes. After-school mentoring programs are effective in providing meaningful relationships, structure, and academic support, thus mitigating risk factors and improving academic achievement. This case example describes a year-long, cross-age peer mentoring program between high school students identified as gifted and elementary students with risk factors attending adjacent schools with support from a local university. The positive results of this community-based mentoring program include improved academic grades, teacher perceptions, student-rated self-efficacy, and social validity. These results are presented along with implications for practice.

KEYWORDS

After school; at-risk; community-based programs; mentoring; school outcomes

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School failure includes discipline problems, suspension, expulsion, academic failure, and dropout. After-school programs provide opportunities for students to have additional academic support, learn new skills, and prepare students with social skills needed for the future. Quality after-school programs help students to develop positive attitudes toward their school and their community while also improving work habits and reducing dropout rates. In the context of programs for students placed at risk, mentoring is defined by an adult working directly with a student placed at- risk with the goals of developing a personal connection that aids in improving student outcomes (Converse & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2009).

Mentoring programs originated in communities and have since been extended to neighborhood school settings for efficiency and convenience. Mentoring programs, in general, have become more common with increased financial support and public exposure (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). Mentoring programs have resulted in improved student outcomes such as personal competence, academic achievement, and adult relationships (Herrera et al., 2011), with a primary focus of developing and fostering relationships between the mentor and the mentee Meaningful relationships are a powerful factor in promoting resilience, specifically for students placed at risk (Masten & Reed, 2002).

One mentoring model that has recently grown in popularity is the cross-age peer mentoring model. In this model, the mentor is an older student who is paired with a younger elementary- or middle school-aged mentee. The benefits of this model are: (a) meetings take place in the elementary school setting, (b) meetings occur weekly, and (c) the relationship is sustained for the duration of the school year.

Crimson GUIDE case example

The Crimson GUIDE (GUIDE: Going up in Dreams and Esteem; CG) was a structured, weekly cross-age peer mentoring program. This program involved students from the same community and their neighboring elementary and high schools and provided elementary students placed at risk an opportunity to develop academic, behavioral, and social skills necessary for reducing the impact of the current at-risk status and promote life-long success.

Setting and participants

Implementation of the CG Program took place at an elementary school selected for the study because it was adjacent to the high school from which potential high school mentors were recruited, making this a community-based program. Participants in this study were recruited from two adjacent school settings. The first group of participants were elementary school students identified by their elementary school administrators and teachers as being in need of additional supports due to being (a) socially and/or (b) academically at risk for school failure (e.g., receiving special education services, performing below grade level). The 11 elementary participants were in third or fourth grade (see Table 1 for elementary participant demographics). Of these students,

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Table 1. Mentee demographics.

Name	Grade	Gender	Race	Reason Referred	SPED	Semesters Completed
Arthur	3	M	O	ELL		2
Brent	3	M	AA	Reading/Behavior		2
*Craig	3	M	AA	Math/Reading/Behavior		1
Dustin	3	M	C	Math/Reading/Behavior	OHI	2
Elmore	3	M	AA	Math/Reading/Behavior		2
*Frances	4	F	C	Math/Reading	LD	2
Gail	4	F	C	Reading		2
Hakeem	3	M	AA	Math/Behavior		2
Alexandra	3	F	C	ELL		1
*Danni	3	F	C	Behavior		1
*Georgia	3	F	AA	Math/Reading		0

Note: AA = African American; C = Caucasian; ELL = English Language Learner; F = Female; LD = Learning Disability; M = Male; O = of Eastern Decent; OHI = Other Health Impairment; SPED = Special Education Eligibility.
*Comparative data not available.

Table 2. Mentor demographics.

	Gender	Race	Grade	Semesters Completed
Daphne	F	AA	11	1
Holly	F	C	11	1
Rachel	F	C	11	1
Chris	M	C	11	2
Rain	F	O	11	1
Leah	F	C	11	2

Note: AA = African American; C = Caucasian; F = Female; M = Male; O = of Eastern Decent.

two were receiving English language services as English was their second language, two had individual education plans and were receiving special education services (one for identified learning disability, one for identified other health impairment), and the remaining six students were identified as placed at risk for requiring special education services in reading, math, and/or behavior. Additionally, academic data was not available for four of these students who moved from the school and their records were sent to the district, and were no longer available at the school.

The second participant group came from high school students who (a) were participating in advanced placement coursework, (b) were nominated by their school counselor as students with responsible behavior and leadership skills, and (c) expressed an interest in participating in service projects. All of these students were in 11th grade and there were five females and one male mentor (see Table 2 for high school participant demographics). While the demographics and abilities were not able to be matched in this example, near-peer matches were made in contrast to mentoring programs that pair an adult with an elementary-age student.

General procedures for mentoring programs

When designing this dual-purposed mentoring program, general critical components guided initial development processes (see Table 1). First, it was important to ensure mentors were adequately trained and prepared at their developmental and age-appropriate level. Second, a formal orientation phase was introduced by the mentoring program leaders. Third, throughout the mentoring program leaders strived to promote independent mentoring skills between the mentors and mentees. Finally, a formal conclusion to the year-long mentoring program was put in place to provide closure and celebration of the success and relationship building that took place.

Training

Successfully implementing a mentoring program requires that mentors go through a training session. Siegle, McCoach, and Wison (2009) report that mentor-training programs reduce mentor dropouts and increases mentor effectiveness. Leaders met with mentors for one two-hour training session to review expectations, provide strategies to assist with the mentoring process, and answer mentor's questions about the program. This training reviewed all CG components as outlined in the CG mentor manual (authors, n.p.). Components included schedule, sample forms, example social skills lessons, code of conduct (mentor), and the partnership agreement. Training techniques employed group discussion and role-playing to mastery with mentoring procedures.

Orientation

The facilitators brought the mentor/mentee pairings to the first CG session and the students were all introduced to each other through icebreaker activities (e.g., informal interviews and group discussion). During this session the leaders reviewed the CG mentee code of conduct, mentor code of conduct, and partnership agreement. The following week, in the second CG session, mentor/mentee pairings met again and began the standard mentoring activities with facilitator guidance and modeling (e.g., goal setting, check-in/check-out, academic support, informal time). For the next three sessions (weeks 3–6) standard CG activities were in place with faded guidance and modeling, including structured social skills lessons chosen by the mentor/mentee pairings. Mentors and mentees demonstrated mastery with these activities, which concluded the "orientation" phase of the project. At that time, facilitators met and came to agreement that mentors were prepared to conduct independent mentoring with minimal facilitator support.

Promoting independent mentoring

The standard CG activities (e.g., check-in, structured academic time, social skills/free choice, check-out) remained in place for the duration of the school year following the orientation phase. However, the social skills component transformed into an informal activity time that was based on whole group, small group, or individual preferred recreational activities (e.g., chess, reading books, art projects). The initial social skills block of time was structured with program leaders modeling social skills lessons and providing a structured social skills curriculum. After a month of conducting formal social skills instruction following the curriculum and leader modeling, the leaders promoted independent mentoring activities through encouraging mentors to incorporate social skills content and practice into preferential free-

choice time. In fact, the students (mentors and mentees) used collaboration and creativity to construct novel games and activities, given the limited amount of materials available. This transition served two purposes. First, the preferential free-choice time was highly regarded by the mentees and favored over structured social skills lessons. Second, the program leaders wanted the mentees to develop independent leadership qualities that complimented their gifts and talents.

Conclusion celebration

At the end of the one-year mentoring project the facilitators hosted a concluding ceremony to formally recognize academic and behavioral success, thank the mentors and mentees, and receive feedback from students and parents. Additionally, mentors and mentees were given the opportunity to show appreciation for one another and say goodbye. In this celebration all of the family members were invited and many attended. Mentors provided their mentees with certificates of completion and highlighted their growth across the program. Additionally, mentees crafted small handmade gifts for their mentors and wrote letters of appreciation for their involvement.

Cross-age peer mentoring program components

The facilitators facilitated relationships between mentors and mentees with three strategies: (a) providing consistent procedures, (b) offering informal time for activities of choice, and (c) remaining flexible and responsive with regard to pairings and activities.

Consistent procedures

Mentors and mentees completed formal goal setting and reviewing forms to provide for structured, consistent daily procedures and relationship-building prompts. At the beginning of each session, mentors listed one leadership goal for themselves and one goal for their mentee(s). At the end of the session each mentor reviewed the afternoon's successes with each mentee and identified one goal for the next session. Additionally, the two primary academic support activities were homework help and academic skill development. Of the ten mentee-students, nine had serious academic deficits. The primary classroom teachers also identified homework completion as a critical skill for development in all of the mentees. When specific academic skills for remediation were identified, mentors were able to provide targeted remediation in addition to homework help.

Informal activity time

Because a primary emphasis of the program was on relationship building between the elementary students placed at risk for failure and their relevant high school mentors, CG program leaders provided a block of unstructured, free-choice time in each mentoring session after homework or academic tutoring was completed. Mentor/mentee pairs could choose an activity to complete on their own or with other pairs, or as a whole group. Often the whole group of mentors and mentees spent time playing on the playground. Other choice activities included playing board games, reading books together, or having informal social time without a specific activity. The program leaders provided basic parameters around the choice activity possibilities (e.g., stay in the designated area, clean up materials, no video or computer games). In general, the mentors allowed the mentees to choose the activity, although if the mentee had difficulty determining an activity of interest the mentor would suggest something of possible interest.

Responsive pairings and program

The third program-specific component was to provide mentor/mentee pairings and instruction that was responsive to the needs of the mentors and the mentees. Prior to the start of the program, mentors and mentees were paired based on gender (when possible) and mentor strengths (e.g., math versus reading) but throughout the process some of the pairings changed. Specifically, the one male mentor ended up with two male mentees who naturally gravitated toward him. Additionally, two female pairings switched mentors when they realized they shared more in common with the other mentor than the one they were assigned. Since the relationship-building component of the program hinged on relatedness and personal interactions, the program leaders remained flexible to any changes in mentor/mentee pairings. All changes were discussed openly and the leaders monitored the new pairings closely to ensure good fit.

In addition to using responsive and flexible pairings, the program also responded to the academic and/or behavioral needs and individual preferences of the students. Through communication with the classroom teachers, mentors were able to determine the needs of their mentees academically and socially/behaviorally in order to provide individualized opportunities for teaching and practicing skills. The program leaders originally modeled this component as they monitored the pairs, guiding mentors to attend to classroom teacher communications and help them design activities that supported the areas of concern. Throughout their time together the mentors displayed initiative and effectiveness in providing individualized support for deficit areas. Similarly, as mentors got to know their mentees better, they were able to provide more activity choices that were responsive to mentee preferences.

Evaluating program effectiveness

In this case study, the program leaders were interested in evaluating the effectiveness of the program for both mentees and mentors. Mentees were monitored for academic grades, classroom behaviors (e.g., attendance, classwork, homework, behavior) and self-efficacy. Additionally, the social validity of the program from the classroom teachers' perspectives was also assessed.

Table 3. Mentee grades.

	ELA Pre	ELA Post	Math Pre	Math Post	Reading Pre	Reading Post	Total Pre	Total Post
Arthur	B	A	B	B	C	B	2.67	3.33
Brent	D	B	B	A	C	A	2.0	3.67
Dustin	A	A	B	A	A	B	3.67	3.67
Elmore	A	A	A	A	B	B	3.67	3.67
Gail	C	B	C	B	B	B	2.33	3.0
Hakeem	C	A	C	B	C	B	2.0	3.33
Alexandra	B	B	C	A	C	C	2.33	3.0
TOTAL							2.67	3.38

Note. ELA = English language arts.

Table 4. Self-efficacy results.

	Pre	Mid	Post
SEQ-C *M (SD)*	66.4 (11.44)	66.7 (7.67)	70.67 (11.24)
Academic SE *M* (SD)	23.8(4.07)	23.22 (2.90)	23.67 (4.80)
Prosocial SE *M (SD)*	24 (4.32)	21.70 (5.85)	22.50 (5.57)
Emotional SE *M (SD)*	66.40 (11.44)	66.78(7.68)	70.67(11.24)

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; SE = self-efficacy; SEQ-C = total score.

Table 5. Mentee progress.

	Post 1 ($n = 6$)	Post 2 ($n = 5$)	Post 3 ($n = 10$)	Mean ($n = 21$)
Attendance	100%	100%	100%	100%
Classwork	87.5%	85%	97.5%	90%
Homework	91.7%	81.5%	97.5%	90.2%
Behavior	91.7%	90%	95%	92.2%

Academic grades

Leaders gathered grades for math, reading, and English from the year prior to the program and at the completion of the program the same academic year as the program (see Table 3). Descriptive statistics for seven of the 11 original mentees were gathered across time due to attrition issues. Academic grade results indicate that students demonstrated positive academic grade outcomes over time. This mean change represents an approximate 19% increase across students and subjects.

Self-efficacy questionnaire

The Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C; Muris, 2001, 2002) was used to measure change in perceived self-efficacy over time and was completed by the mentees three times. The first time point was completed prior to implementing the mentoring program, at the initial recruitment and assent meeting. The second time point was completed in between fall and spring semesters as a midpoint measure. The third time point was completed at the completion of the one-year mentoring program. The measure has 24 items in which the students scored on a 5-point Likert Scale their response to question and the scale can be broken down into three subscales, "academic self-efficacy," "social self-efficacy," and "emotional self-efficacy," with eight items in each subscale. Ten students completed the pre-SEQ-C, nine completed the mid-SEQ-C, and six completed the post-SEQ-C. Overall, scores on the total SEQ-C questionnaire and each of the subscales improved over time. See Table 4 for results.

Teacher perceptions of student progress

Leaders asked for teacher perceptions of mentee progress in the last three months of the program in order to report updated descriptive information regarding: (a) attendance, (b) classwork, (c) homework, and (d) behavior. Teachers were given weekly opportunities to submit a communication form with Likert scale ratings on each component for their classroom students who were participating as mentees in the study. Attendance remained positive across the time points. Classwork ratings improved from 87.5% to 97.5% over time. Homework also demonstrated improvements with initial ratings of 91.7% and final ratings of 97.5%. Finally, behavior improved from 91.7% to 95%. These improvements highlight student progress in areas of deficit which are of critical importance to long-term school success. See Table 5 for results.

Social validity

In order to measure the social validity of the one-year mentoring program, the classroom teachers of the mentees were asked five open-ended questions. The five social-validity questions for classroom teachers were: (a) describe how participating in the program impacted your students' social performance, (b) describe how participating in the program impacted the academic performance for mentees in your classroom, (c) explain the assumptions you had about the mentoring program before starting, (d) describe what was successful about the program, and (e) describe how the program can be improved. All of the teachers responded positively, stating that students gained confidence, loved and talked about attending, looked forward to CG days, and felt special for being included in the program. Teachers responded that it helped with homework completion and quality, student (academic) scores increased, and students were more responsible about and proud of their academic work. Finally, the teachers suggested (a) more academic-related materials being used, (b) concluding communications, (c) more communication throughout the study, and (d) linking what mentees learned in CG back to the classroom as improvements for the program.

Practical implications

Several best practices in mentoring programs improve effectiveness regardless of the setting in which the mentoring takes place. Mentoring programs should include: (a) a component where the fidelity of program implementation is monitored, (b) ongoing training for mentors, (c) parental/

family involvement, (d) structured, appropriate activities for mentors and mentees, and (e) clearly stated high expectations for attendance for mentors (Karcher, 2005). When all five best practices for mentoring programs are implemented, DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) found program effectiveness doubled. Through structured oversight and planning, mentors should work individually to build trusting, supportive relationships, working collaboratively with mentees to reach a commonly accepted and valued goal (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr (2004).

Community-based programs require dedication, coordination, and responsiveness in order to provide improved outcomes for those placed at-risk. The current program supported mentors and mentees and provided a foundational structure for the cross-age mentoring program. Ultimately, meaningful relationships were built, elementary students improved academically, behaviorally, and socially. Finally, gifted high school students developed their leadership skills and noted having positive experiences from this service opportunity.

Notes on Contributors

Sara McDaniel is an associate professor at the University of Alabama. Her current research interests are targeted behavioral interventions, interventions for students placed at risk, and preventative interventions.

Kevin Besnoy is the director of ACCESS Virtual Learning and associate director of K–12 programs for the College of Continuing Studies at the University of Alabama.

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