Youth Mentoring: Program and Mentor Best Practices

Youth mentoring programs have been on the rise for the past few decades, yet little has been done to synthesize best practices, as identified in existing research, for programs or mentors to follow. In a review of the literature on mentoring, eight different types of mentoring relationships were identified along with four program best practices and six mentor best practices. Youth success outcomes and measures also are shared. Adhering to these practices will strengthen programs, lay the groundwork for more formal measurement, and provide the best possible mentoring for youth.

Mentoring is defined here as the pairing of a youth to a non-parental adult figure who can serve as a role model and provide support for that youth. Lerner (2007) contends “...the presence of adult mentors in the community is the most important developmental asset associated with positive youth development” (p. 217). In the United States, approximately 25% of all youth and 50% of minority youth live in single-parent households (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Tierney et al. (2000) argued that this rise in single-parent families, coupled with the breakdown of neighborhood socialization, and a growing need for parents, especially single parents, to work long hours outside the home, has left an increasing number of youth isolated from adults. This isolation may lead to a decrease in positive contact opportunities between youth and adults, a situation that fuels the increasing interest and research into mentoring programs.

Handy, Rodgers, and Schwietertman (2011) highlighted ways in which positive partnerships between youth and adults can be most beneficial. In accordance with their efforts, we reviewed the literature concerning mentoring relationships to identify the best practices in terms of producing positive outcomes for youth mentees.

Mentoring success, in the context of formal assessment and how to measure it, is a matter of some debate (Rhodes, 2008). Success in mentoring relationships is often measured on scales developed for psychology research and designed to test particular psychological outcomes (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004). Most commonly, a researcher gathers pre- and post-data from mentees in one or more programs to look at improvements in a variety of areas that are perceived to reflect the mentees’ well-being. Researchers who reviewed studies that used this type of broad evidence base have concluded that mentoring programs produce a range of positive youth outcomes such as improvement in self-perception, academic performance, parent-child interactions, peer support, social acceptance, and reductions in drug and alcohol use (Hansen, 2007; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Langhout et al., 2004). However, the lack of clearly defined best practices can lead to inconsistency in implementation and in outcomes. Therefore, clarification of best practices for programs and for mentors is critical if we are to reach the potential outcomes systematically. Implementation of these best practices will empower program organizers to achieve positive outcomes more consistently and will allow researchers to measure change in a more rigorous manner.

To establish a consistent set of outcomes, an understanding of

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the various types of formal and informal mentoring relationships is necessary. Understanding the connection, setting, and purpose of the relationship helps to clarify and narrow program goals. Knowing this information empowers practitioners to focus on program types that often target youth populations most in need of positive mentoring relationships.

METHOD

The content of this article was distilled from a study that the Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center (Anastasia & Drever, 2010) conducted for the Wyoming Department of Health, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Division, which included reviewing the literature on youth mentoring program types and best practices for implementation in the state of Wyoming. Because the research for this article consisted of interviews with professionals who are not quoted and a secondary review of the literature, no approval for human subject review was required. By reviewing secondary data and supplementing findings with practitioner interviews, eight central mentoring types were identified, four program best practices, and six mentor best practices that support the central youth success outcomes identified in the literature (Anastasia & Drever, 2010).

Mentoring Types

Various types of mentoring derive from combinations of three primary component pairings: the connection (natural/assigned), setting (school-based/community-based), and purpose or intent of the mentoring relationship (developmental/prescriptive) (Anastasia & Drever, 2010).

Connection—Natural or Assigned Mentoring

Natural mentoring relationships evolve organically. Mentors and mentees are not assigned by a community group, school, church, or other organization (Rhodes, Bogat, Roffman, Edelman, & Galasso, 2002). The relationship develops spontaneously and the mentor and mentee are the primary agents in the relationship. In contrast, assigned relationships have an organization to match mentors with mentees, and often provide training and other support to mentors.

Setting—Community-Based or School-Based

Community-based programs tend to focus broadly on cognitive, social-emotional, and identity development outcomes. School-based mentoring programs are geared toward improving grades, school attendance and behavior, interest in learning, and plans to pursue higher education (Rhodes, 2008). The articulated goals of the two types may be contrasting, but there is evidence that when conducted with fidelity, either type of setting can
produce broadly equivalent improvement (Karcher & Herrera, 2007; Pedersen, Woolum, Gagne, & Coleman, 2009) and using a combination of these settings for activities is a best practice for any mentoring program (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002).

**Intent—Developmental or Prescriptive**

Developmental mentoring relationships tend to be youth-driven and activity-focused (Langhout et al., 2004; Pedersen et al., 2009). Prescriptive mentoring is characterized by direct emphasis on behavioral and attitudinal goals that the mentor or program considers positive. Although the developmental approach is more effective at improving youth outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002; White, 2009), there are documented instances of prescriptive mentoring achieving desired outcomes (Rhodes, 2007; Spencer, 2007).

By selecting one component from each of the pairings (natural/assigned, school-based/community-based, and developmental/prescriptive), eight possible mentoring type-permutations emerge. And, although portions of all six components may be present in any mentoring relationship, the primary mode in each of the three component pairings serves to further clarify the type of mentoring. The eight types of permutations are presented below, with examples.

1. Natural, Community-Based, Developmental (NCD): 4-H, sports leagues, Boy/Girl Scouts of America, family, and friends
2. Natural, Community-Based, Prescriptive (NCP): Magistrate mandates that a youth identify a mentor
3. Natural, School-Based, Developmental (NSD): Clubs, sports, and any elected program or activity that requires the youth to identify a mentor
4. Natural, School-Based, Prescriptive (NSP): School administrator mandates that a youth identify a mentor
5. Assigned, Community-Based, Developmental (ACD): Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Partners Mentoring Youth
6. Assigned, Community-Based, Prescriptive (ACP): Magistrate assigns troubled youth a mentor
7. Assigned, School-Based, Developmental (ASD): School program coordinator assigns a mentor to develop skill building beyond the classroom
8. Assigned, School-Based, Prescriptive (ASP): Tutoring

The most commonly studied of these permutations are the ACD and the non-familial NCD mentoring relationships. These types are both easier to monitor and measure and most mentoring sources accept outside donations and grants, which often requires a degree of program accountability. In most cases, it is easier to track and observe an assigned relationship due to the controlled environment and pre-established goals. The natural mentoring that comes in NCD clubs is not usually intended to be individual mentoring, although this focused attention often happens when an adult takes on an authority role in the life of a youth. Although the best practices shared here are framed around programs that are ACD, each can be adapted to fit any of the permutations described in this article and have particular application for any assigned program or NCD. Other natural relationships where an official is involved in requiring youth self-selection (NSDs and NSPs) also could benefit from adhering to these best practices.

**Program Best Practices**

Assigned mentoring programs for youth are successful when they create an environment that supports and sustains individual success (DuBois et al., 2002). This success is initially established and reestablished with the acquisition of each mentor into a professional environment that provides a formal program structure, clear expectations for mentors, ongoing training and support, and regular self-monitoring (see Figure 1).

The best practice of *formal structure* is characterized by the establishment of a policy and procedures manual and the use of a variety of school and community settings for activities (DuBois et al., 2002). This manual should outline all aspects of hiring, training, and retaining staff in order to aid in clarification of expectations and establish protocols that lead to fidelity of implementation (Keller, 2006).
When recruiting a mentor, the organization should adhere to the best practice of developing clear expectations, even if there is no pay involved. These expectations include a job description and interview protocols that address the specific competencies required for the position (Keller, 2006). Although not essential to successful mentoring, prior helper training can be beneficial. The practice of identifying the level of prior helper training and providing supplemental support in pedagogical instruction and youth development theory and practice can be beneficial. Pairing mentors who have not been formally trained with mentoring peers who have been trained may be one way to address this disparity, and should be studied further. The organization should perform background and safety screenings for all employees (DuBois et al., 2002).

Once hired, each mentor should be given an orientation (DuBois et al., 2002; Keller, 2006). In addition to orientation, the organization should provide access to ongoing support and training for mentors throughout their association with the program (DuBois et al., 2002; Pedersen et al., 2009; Rhodes, 2007). Ongoing training, although essential, has been shown to be more effective in combination with preparatory training; mentoring organizations should make both meaningful.
orientation (i.e., 6 or more hours) and ongoing training available to their mentors (DuBois, 2007).

Regular organizational self-monitoring to evaluate staff training, review the organizational culture, and revise staff retention efforts is essential to ensure fidelity and targeting of goals. In addition, a regular assessment to identify barriers that can limit staff success also is beneficial (Keller, 2006).

**Mentor Best Practices**

Positive outcomes occur when the mentor-mentee relationship lasts for 1 year or longer and when the mentor understands what approaches, practices, and attitudes work (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, 2008). Best practices can serve to increase the rate of success in formal mentoring programs and can reduce negative impacts, such as early relationship termination. Regardless of the reason for termination, it can be perceived by the mentee as intentional rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Lebolt, Rincorn, & Freitas, 1998; DuBois et al., 2002; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) and can lead to negative self-perception and lowered academic performance. The literature identifies six best practices for individual mentors: (a) training, (b) commitment to the relationship, (c) respect for the mentee’s background, (d) respect for the individual, (e) mutual activities, and (f) use of support (see Figure 1). Each of these is discussed below.

Although those in “helping professions” (e.g., teachers, counselors) who have received formal training have greater predictive success as mentors, training and support provided to lay persons can produce similar results (DuBois et al., 2002). Mentors should avail themselves of those opportunities (DuBois et al., 2002, Liang & West, 2007).

In addition to formal training, commitment to the relationship is critical. Committed mentors meet with mentees regularly (once per week or more) and over a long (1 year or more) period of time (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992; Tolan, Henry, Shoeny, & Bass, 2005).

When respect for family, class, and culture is established, the relationship can build trust and start to grow. A lack of respect for the mentee’s background in mixed race, class, and gender relationships can lead to early termination (Flaxman, Ascher, & Harrington, 1988). Mentoring can succeed regardless of social and economic contrasts, but only if the mentee feels comfortable that the mentor respects his or her background (Liang & West, 2007). This best practice should not seek to assimilate the mentee into the mentor’s culture (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002); rather the mentor should foster existing positive behaviors within the youth’s culture and background through support and modeling.

With the knowledge that young people are not yet adults, mentors should have respect for individual outlook and attitudes. Youth learn and grow in age-appropriate ways. Mentors should respect their mentees’ youthful perspectives and their need to have fun and engage in challenging activities; it is also important that each youth mentoring plan be designed based on goals and needs as defined by the mentee (Langhout et al., 2004).

Mentor respect for the mentee’s perspective includes being open to engaging in relationship building through activities, meaning that mentors should engage mentees through shared activities, which will allow the mentor-mentee relationship to grow on its own. This approach works better than simply sitting and discussing problems and issues (Langhout et al., 2004; Lerner, Brittian, & Fay, 2007).

Mentoring can be challenging. A strong support system for the mentor is essential to maintaining a long-term relationship. Mentors should be open to seeking support as needed (DuBois et al., 2002). The sponsoring organization should provide access to support, but support also may come from the mentor’s peers, family, or professionals outside the organization.
Youth Success Outcomes
The ultimate goal of mentoring is achieving successful outcomes for youth. This broad concept of success can be summarized in four major goals:
(a) becoming a long-term contributing member of society, (b) improving self-worth, (c) increasing potential for success, and (d) improving communication skills (see Figure 1).

The mentoring organization should strive to empower youth to become long-term, contributing members of society. This citizenship development includes creating a positive environment that encourages a strong work ethic and civic engagement in a way that increases mentee knowledge, improves pro-social behavior, and increases social capital (Karcher, 2007; Langhout et al., 2004).

Related to citizenship is the goal of improved self-worth, which includes improved skills for personal development, increased resiliency, and improved happiness and emotional wellbeing (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Mentoring can help improve potential for success through enhanced skills and behaviors, improved academic performance, awareness of personal potential, and awareness of resources (Rhodes et al., 2002). Success also comes in the form of improved communication skills, which are apparent in a variety of ways including strengthened youth-adult relationships, positive peer relationships, skills for improved interactions in the workplace and other social settings (Karcher, 2007; Langhout et al., 2004).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH
Reviewing the literature raises awareness of the gaps in research around mentoring and mentoring programs. If we can better establish the goals and needs of each mentee at the beginning of his or her introduction into a mentoring program, then we can establish measurable outcomes for those goals and use this information to create stronger matches and potentially increase the success rate among assigned relationships.

Research opportunities also exist to measure change in the youth over the life of the relationship using pre-post measurement designs. Because the current research has focused on desired programmatic outcomes, assumptions are often made around the infusion of trust, mutuality, respect, and empathy (TMRE) somewhere in the relationship building process. However, implications that somehow TMRE must be present, or must develop in the relationship, to achieve individual and programmatic outcomes have not been clarified. Thus, research to better understand the relationship of TMRE to mentoring success would be helpful. Practitioners and researchers agree that TMRE must be present to achieve successful outcomes; therefore, there is potential to use TMRE as a measurement of predicting persistence of the mentoring relationship, which subsequently holds potential to be used to increase matching success rates. If researchers can identify and measure TMRE unique to the individual mentee and the mentor in a pre-post instrument, shifts in TMRE from the mentor to the mentee (or vice versa) could demonstrate measurable change.

Having reviewed the research and defined best practices for programs and mentors, our current understanding of what matters most in the success of youth mentoring is the level of commitment and respect brought into the relationship by the mentor as well as the level of professionalism with which the program is run. In particular, professionalism is necessary in informing, evaluating, and above all, supporting mentors. Adhering to these effective best practices for mentoring organizations and mentors will strengthen programs, lay the groundwork for more formal measurement of outcomes, empower programs to identify gaps in service, improve delivery methods, and ultimately provide the best possible support for youth.

REFERENCES


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