

The Effects of Mentoring on At-Risk Youth:

A Look into the GEARS Mentoring Program of Superior, WI

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, there is the idea that every person has an equal opportunity at an education that will benefit their future. However, there is a large gap of achievement between children from different socioeconomic levels. Mentoring programs are quickly on the rise as an intervention strategy to reduce the amount of at-risk children in America. If mentoring programs are effective in narrowing the achievement gap, they are a vital part of the idea of fair play in American education. This study utilized a mixture of questionnaires and interviews to investigate the effects the GEARS mentoring program has on its at-risk adolescent participants. Specifically, the study investigated the relationship of a mentoring program with at-risk students' grades, attitudes, relationships, and aspirations. Participants in the study reported improvements in all areas that were examined. These results indicate that programs such as GEARS are having a positive impact on at-risk youth. By providing these youth with a positive role model and getting them on track to further their education and ultimately better their lives, the GEARS program is working towards closing the achievement gap between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds. While this research indicates that the GEARS program is having a positive impact on its participants, further research into more mentoring programs is necessary to determine the overall impact on at-risk youth across the country.

Introduction

Education is one of the biggest foundations of the American society. The United States' social system is built on the idea of fair play for all students. The idea is that through education, everyone has a chance to improve their lives. Yet, we have an enormous achievement gap between different socioeconomic levels of people in our country. Literature shows that not everyone has that opportunity for fair play at an education that will better their future. Background plays a large part in students' achievements. Mentoring programs are growing rapidly in our country, especially as an intervention program for at-risk youth, as part of a solution to closing this enormous gap. If mentoring programs are working to narrow the achievement gap, they are important to the idea of fair play in American education.

Mentoring, as defined by Rhodes (2004), is “a relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé – a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement” (p. 3). There are over 3 million children in a mentoring program in the U.S. alone. Although each program may be set up somewhat differently, most focus on pairing an at-risk child with an adult who genuinely cares about them. Through this relationship and spending time with a caring adult, the youth finds direction and support that they might not have otherwise. The goal of these programs is for youth to learn how to better deal with obstacles throughout their lives both academically and socially.

What puts a child into the “at-risk” category? Slavin and Madden (as cited by Johnson and Lampley, 2010) categorized at-risk children as having at least one of the following characteristics: Retention in grade level, below average attendance, behavioral problems, low socioeconomic status or poverty, violence, low achievement, substance abuse, or teenage pregnancy. Keating, Tomishima, Foster, and Alessandri (2002) described at-risk youth as youth

who come from a single-parent family, appear to have emotional or behavioral instability, and who do not have the support they need to understand and appropriately handle developmental tasks successfully. A child who possesses one or more of these characteristics is at an increased likelihood of school failure and of dropping out of school completely. By putting these students in an intervention program where they are mentored by an adult who provides a role model and support system, it will increase their chances at having a fair play in American education which will ultimately increase their chances at improving their lives.

Literature Review

Background, Education, and Mentoring

As previously stated, socioeconomic status plays a large part in education and the level of academic achievement a child has the chance of accomplishing. In fact, Reardon (2011) stated that “family income is now nearly as strong as parental education in predicting children’s achievement” (p. 2). Reardon (2011) studied the academic achievement levels between the rich and the poor of the United States. The study explored the relationship between the growing income gap between families in these two socioeconomic statuses and the achievement gap of the children born into these families. Results of this study showed that as the income gap grows wider, so does the achievement gap of the children. The achievement gap between children from high and low-income families was about 30 to 40 percent larger in 2001 than it had been just 25 short years earlier (Reardon, 2011). Parents of higher income families have more resources to pour into their children’s cognitive development than those of lower income families. Lower income families also have less social support systems and resources than those in higher income brackets (Reardon, 2011). Less resources and investment of lower income parents’ for their child’s education increases the chances of the child becoming at-risk. Because at-risk youth are

at much more risk of school failure and of dropping out of school, it is vitally important for the educational system to find programs that would be effective in helping these students overcome the obstacles they will face throughout their school years (Thompson & Vance, 2001).

Youths who are advantaged have more cultural capital, or “high status cultural signals used in cultural and social selection” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 153). Pierre Bourdieu believed that schools are not fair for everyone. He stated that the more cultural capital or higher class the student holds, the more school is set up to be beneficial to that student. If a student is from a lower class and holds less cultural capital, they are punished academically because of it. These students from a lower class enter school with different kinds of knowledge, skills, language while the upper class enter already having the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in schools (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Often, this leaves a lower class student set up for failure, placing them in the at-risk category from the time the student enters school.

Research is appearing on mentoring, it is showing that there are positive outcomes for people who have mentors in their youth. Mentors have a strong impact on mentees performance through high school and on their overall educational achievement (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009). Research shows that at-risk youth who have a mentoring relationship have better outcomes in education, work, lifestyle, and overall health. Yet, in the United States, intervention programs such as mentoring are based on what is known as the medical model. This means that before a disease can ever be treated, it must first be manifested (Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). If this is applied to education, it means that a student must first fail or do poorly before any kind of action is taken to fix the problem. This model fosters the growth of the number of at-risk youth we have in our country. At-risk youth who are in most need of a mentor though, are also the least likely to reach out for a mentor. Erickson et al. (2009)

state, “youths with many resources are more likely than other young people to have mentors, but those with few resources are likely to benefit more from having a mentor . . . in their lives” (p. 244). At-risk students have fewer social resources than advantaged students, leaving them in greater need of a mentor.

According to Herrera, Baldwin-Grossman, Kauh, and McMaken (2011), students between the ages of nine and 14 are going through major changes, both developmental and school-related, which make them more at risk to academic, social, and behavioral problems. The earlier at-risk children are exposed to mentoring programs the better. By the sixth grade and middle school, students who failed their core math, English, and or reading classes, went to school less than eighty percent of the time, or were singled out for poor behavior problems, only had a 10 to 20 percent chance of graduating high school on time (Metlife Foundation, 2011).

The more parental, peer, and personal resources one has, the more likely they are to have a mentoring relationship. The biggest determinate of being involved in a mentor program or having a mentor is how many personal resources one has. The more resources, such as having an engaging personality, attractive appearance, greater aspirations academically, and higher levels of intelligence, all increase the chances significantly of youth having a mentor. Seventy four percent of youth with these attributes have a mentor while only fifty three percent without have them (Erickson et al., 2009). At-risk youth are often lacking in one or more of these categories, leaving them without a mentor. Disadvantaged or at-risk youth struggle to locate support and resources and often times, they are not as available as one would desire (Maldonado, Quarles, Lacey, & Thompson, 2008).

*The Impact of Mentoring Programs on At-Risk Youth**Grades*

Grades and attitudes towards grades also tend to change and improve when children are involved in mentoring programs. Mentors provide academic support for the mentees, which then inspire and pushes youth to perform better academically. One participant in the Big Sisters program stated, “I would definitely say that my Big Sister is very concerned with my school work. I always try to work very hard and keep my grades up high for not only my parents, but so my Big Sister also could be proud of me too” (Maldonado et al., 2008, p. 228). Other mentees had similar results. Youth have higher academic expectations for themselves once they have a mentor supporting them.

At-risk students who entered a mentoring program with much lower grade point averages than the rest of the students showed vast improvements by the end of their intervention program when compared to the rest of the group (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Mentoring programs are showing results for the students who need programs the most. In a study done by Johnson and Lampley (2010) on the effects of LISTEN, a mentoring program for at-risk middle school students, it was found that students who participated in the program for a single year showed significant improvements in their grade point averages. During the study, 51 of the 54 students involved in the program improved their grades. At-risk students show progress in their grade point averages when connected with a mentor. Thompson and Vance (2001) found that achievement scores of the students mentored increased even when the mentors were not emphasizing the importance of academics and were not solely focusing on that aspect. In this instance, just having the positive one-to-one attention from an adult role model may have influenced academic success.

School Absences

Once in a mentoring relationship, youth had less unexcused absences from school than did youth who were similar to them but were not in a mentoring program. Youth in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentor program skipped half as many days as ones who were not a part of it. Other programs say students reduce their absences by over a week (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002). Additionally, students who are involved in a mentoring relationship are more likely to stay in school for a longer number of years. In a study done by Torrance (1982), it was stated that “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” (Thompson & Vance, 2001, p. 230). With all the development that has been made with mentoring programs, one could only expect the numbers to have risen in 2012. Drop-out rates decreased upon participating in these types of programs as well (Thompson & Vance, 2001). Overall, youth in mentoring programs improve their attendance and stay in school longer compared to those who are not.

Aspirations

Mentoring increases the likelihood of at-risk youth to go onto higher education. Mentored youth conveyed that their choices in higher education was shaped and influenced by the guidance and support they received from their mentors (Maldonado et al., 2008). Because the at-risk students had someone to help them and direct them, they were making constructive choices for their futures. According to Erickson et al. (2009), “Youths with a mentor are fifty three percent more likely to advance to the next level of education than are youths who do not have a mentor” (p. 354).

Personal Benefits

Besides academics, mentoring programs have positive impacts on youth's communication skills and confidence levels. Mentors work with their mentees to build up their social skills. This is essential in growing at-risk youths' self-confidence and capability. By watching and learning from their role models, the youth learn how to communicate better and interact with other people (Maldonado et al., 2008). Better communication and coping skills will be beneficial in all areas of the at-risk youths' life. The combination of a higher self-confidence and the ability to communicate better will be vital for at-risk youth to furthering their lives in positive ways.

When in mentoring programs, the behavior and emotional well-being of these children tends to be impacted as well. At-risk youth in higher quality mentoring programs often have much more self-esteem and are less depressed (Whitney, Hendricker & Offutt, 2011). They also participate in less risk behaviors such as drug or alcohol use, gang membership, and fighting (Rhodes & Dubois, 2008).

The GEARS Program

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness in Superior, or GEARS, is a mentoring program that began in August 2009 between the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS) and the Superior Middle School. The mission of the GEARS program is to support the academic, social, and emotional growth of at-risk adolescent students by increasing Developmental Assets. The GEARS program strives to assist in preparing middle school students to be successful both currently and in their futures. College students at the university are interviewed, trained, and then placed in a classroom with a team of four to five mentors to mentor on average 10 at-risk youth. Mentors are also required to enroll in a three credit course at UWS which focuses on at-risk

youth. Middle school students are referred by their teachers to the GEARS program because they are showing one or more characteristics of being at-risk, including having a failing mark in at least one class. The coordinator then calls home to present the opportunity for students to join GEARS and if parents and student are interested, a contract is signed and students begin after-school tutoring.

Mentors in the program tutor the students for approximately two hours after school twice a week. Mentors and mentees also spend four to six hours together outside of the school at planned activities once or a twice a month throughout the entire semester. In the 2010 spring semester, the program was implemented into the school district with 10 college mentors and 21 Superior Middle School sixth grade students. By the fall semester of 2010, the program grew to 32 UWS mentors and 60 middle school student participants. Currently in 2012, there are 34 UWS mentors and 78 Superior Middle School students throughout the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Along with the academic school year mentoring, the GEARS program also offers a four week summer program. Here, the college mentors and middle school students get a chance to spend time together focusing on academic and social issues. Field trips out into the community are included once a week. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness in Superior is showing positive results. In the first year of the program, 95% of GEARS students improved their grades in at least one core academic area while 50% of the students improved their grades in the four core classes: Math, Language Arts, Science and Social Studies.

The GEARS program focuses on increasing the amount of Developmental Assets that at-risk youth in the program have. The Developmental Assets were established in 1990 by the Search Institute of Minnesota. They are made up of forty building blocks consisting of different

experiences and favorable qualities that foster positive development for youth. The list of assets includes 20 internal assets and 20 external assets. The core areas of the external assets are: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The core areas of the internal assets are: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. The more of these assets that the youth possesses, the better off that child will be. For example, 27% of children with 0-10 Developmental Assets will maintain good health. At the same time, the percent of children with 31-40 assets has a dramatic increase to 88% (Search Institute, 2006).

According to the Search Institute (2011), “Over time, studies of more than 2.2 million young people consistently show that the more assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to thrive” (Who Needs Them?, para. 1). The assets influence youth to make more positive life choices that will ultimately result in them having more positive qualities, such as being more caring, responsible and successful as an adult. The ultimate goal of the GEARS program is to increase the Assets of the Superior Middle School students who are at-risk as a youth through their mentoring program, ensuring that the child gets on track for a healthy, successful life as an adult.

Methods

Design

This study utilized a mixture of questionnaires and interviews to investigate the effects of the GEARS mentoring program on its at-risk youth participants. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for the purpose of this study to be able to gain understanding and insight from the participants’ experiences. Secondary data from the GEARS program that tracked students GPAs and attendance rates were also included in the study.

Participants

Thirteen middle school GEARS participants and two GEARS program coordinators were involved in the study. Eight of the mentees had been a part of the program for two years. The remaining five had participated in GEARS for at least one year. All 13 of the participants were in the seventh or eighth grade. The two GEARS coordinators interviewed were involved with designing and implementing the GEARS program beginning in 2009.

Procedure

All GEARS participants were given the opportunity to participate in the study with parents' approval. Thirteen of the students were granted approval to partake in the study by their parents. On the final day of the GEARS program for the 2012 academic school year, the data was collected in each of the participating GEARS students' classrooms. The students had 45 minutes to fill out a questionnaire consisting of nine questions. The questions focused on the effects that the GEARS program has had on their education and overall life. Specific questions targeted academic impact while others targeted the youth's attitude.

The two GEARS coordinators were interviewed, being asked a series of nine questions total. The questions ranged from how the GEARS program was developed to similar known programs. Other questions were directed towards the viewed effects the program has had on its at-risk youth participants that each of the coordinators have witnessed. They were also asked about the successes and failures the program has had thus far.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires completed by the 13 GEARS mentees were first compiled and grouped together by answers to each question. The answers were then analyzed to find patterns and consistency across participant answers.

Secondary Data Analysis

GEARS collects yearly data that tracks the participants GPAs and attendance. This data is used by GEARS to assess the effectiveness of the mentoring program. The secondary data was reviewed and included to provide objective and measurable support to the qualitative measures used in the study.

Personal Observations

I have been a mentor for the GEARS program since it began in 2010. As a mentor, I have been able to witness first-hand the growth of the program and the effects it has had on the at-risk youth who have participated in it. The observations I have made are an advantage to this study as I have been closely involved with the entire process of both the program itself and the study. When one has personal observations, they can tend to privilege their own insights and experiences. To avoid this, the study includes outside data from GEARS mentees, coordinators, and secondary data collected by the GEARS program.

Results

Based on the findings from the questionnaires, the GEARS mentees' reported having positive experiences throughout the GEARS program. The mentees' answers to the questionnaire provided insight to the benefits the at-risk students have received from being involved with the GEARS program. Most reported positive effects in the following areas: grades, attitude, relationships, and aspirations. The secondary data that was reviewed also showed the GEARS programs had positive results in certain areas.

Measurable Outcomes of Mentoring

The secondary data showed that during the 2010-2011 academic year, 73% of all grades were at a C- or higher for GEARS students in the fourth quarter. In the first quarter of the 2010-

2011 school year, 21% of the students were at a failing mark. By the fourth quarter, the number had dropped down to only nine percent. The sixth grade cohort improved their grades by 75% in one year, while the seventh grade cohort improved their grades by 63%.

The secondary data showed that throughout the 2011-2012 school year, roughly 53% of all students in the GEARS program had grades at a C- or above. In the beginning of the school year, 74% of the GEARS participants had grades above a failing mark. By the end of the 2011-12 school year, that number had increased to approximately 81%. Throughout the school year, an average of 54% of sixth graders, 57% of seventh graders, and 39% of eighth graders in the GEARS program improved their grades.

Mentee Questionnaires

Grades

Of the 13 students who were involved in the study, nine reported that their grades have improved since joining the GEARS program. Others said if they were not a part of the program, they would be failing or their grades would go back to where they were before being in the program. A few mentees reported no longer getting D's in their classes, but bringing them up to B's. Improvements in core classes such as math and language arts were also reported.

“Everything, they changed everything. Of course my grades,” one student answered to the question of how the program has affected their academics.

The most common improvement that was stated by the participants was that they now get their work done and turned in in a timely manner. Nine of the 13 reported they now had time set up where they could work, get help, and complete homework given to them throughout the school day. The after-school mentoring program provided an environment for the mentees to actually sit down and get help to do the work they needed to do. After getting the help during the

GEARS program, some students expressed beginning to do their homework and reading on their own at home. One student found that after joining the GEARS program, they no longer have to stay after school to retake tests. Several mentees reported that the program has taught them organization, leadership and time management skills.

The mentors are an important part of the program and to help improve grades, according to the students. The support and guidance from the GEARS mentors assisted the students not only in completing their homework and getting it turned in to their teachers on time, but also through daily problems they may face as middle school students. One student said “we have awesome mentors to help us out and also help us with our ups and downs”. Another stated, “They always help me... whenever I need help, they’re there.”

Attitude

Another area in which the participants reported improvements was in their attitudes, both towards academics and other people as well. Answers to the questions showed that a number of the students’ attitudes towards getting homework done had changed. “My attitude has changed... I get my homework done. It won’t be as bad if I get it done,” wrote one of the mentees who has only been in the program for one year. The mindset of being able to successfully complete their homework and get it turned in on time has become apparent after working with the GEARS mentors in the program.

Together with their attitude changing about doing homework and academics, mentees attitudes about the way they act also have been impacted by the GEARS program and its’ mentors. Mentees reported feelings of being more confident, able to succeed, and more respectful and nice to other people. Ten of the 13 participants in the study reported being nicer,

more respectful, or thinking about others' feelings since joining the GEARS program. One mentee said the program made them a better person and made them think more of what they do. Another student stated GEARS taught them to "not offend anyone in any way." While the program is working on helping improve at-risk student's academics, it is also helping to shape the youth's social and personal skills.

Relationships

A question in the study focused on investigating if the GEARS program has had any impact on the relationships that the at-risk youth in the program have with peers, teachers, or their family members. Answers to the question found that while the program did have some positive effect on some of the mentees relationships, others did not find the program helping in this area. One participant found that the program showed them that it is okay to ask the teacher for help if they did not understand. Some stated that their parents and grandparents were now proud of the grades and how much they have improved them while in the GEARS program. Several of the students answered that through the GEARS program, they have made new friends or improved relationships they already have with peers.

Aspirations

One of the biggest goals of the GEARS program is to assist and prepare the at-risk youth to be successful on their pursuit of a higher education. Questions in the study asked the mentees if the program has had any effect on their future plans in life. Many of the students reported that the program and more specifically the mentors have had a positive impact in this area. Some mentees focused on the fact that the program taught them to think seriously about the future and the importance of never giving up. As one student said, "they told me to never give up and to keep going; and to follow your dreams."

Others found that what they learned from the GEARS program was that they needed a good education if they want to get a good job. One mentee stated “To have fun, study more because college will get you somewhere” is what they learned from their mentors. Another wrote about getting through high school and college so that they could move on and do what they wanted with their life. Several mentees stated that the program helped them realize what they wanted to do when they grow up and that the GEARS program would help them achieve those dreams. One mentee even reported now wanting to become either a lawyer, cop, or doctor when they are older. The GEARS program is helping the students to raise their expectations and aspirations that these at-risk youth have for their futures. From the program and the support of the mentors, the youth are learning that they do have a successful future ahead of them, if they can get on the right track in their middle school grade levels.

Coordinator Questionnaires

According to the coordinators of the GEARS program, positive effects are being seen in the GEARS students both in and out of the classroom. After students join the program, they have noticed that along with their GPAs increasing, students also have a better school attendance rate. They observed students beginning to understand the importance of organization and a stronger work ethic. Participants showed an increase in respect for both their teachers and other authority figures. Ultimately, they become more engaged in school in general after joining the GEARS program.

Nonacademic changes in the GEARS participants were also observed by the coordinators. Because the program has an emphasis on increasing Developmental Assets, they observed positive changes in areas such as social competence, positive identity, and positive values. Participants are better at setting goals and are much more confident in themselves and the

decisions they are making. They also begin to trust themselves and their abilities. At the same time, they have viewed the participants decreasing the amount of unhealthy choices they are making in their lives outside of GEARS. Through the program and the authentic relationships the GEARS mentees form with their mentors, the at-risk youth discover their own personal talents. The bonds formed between the mentors and the youth creates positive role models for the students. They reported that some students remark that “GEARS is like their family”.

Despite the numbers of successes the GEARS program has had, it was also noted by the coordinators that there are still some underlying difficulties. One of greatest challenges faced by the GEARS program is that while working with disadvantaged populations, they also have to work with several challenging factors such as truancy, negative attitudes, and lack of support from home. Another challenge the GEARS program faces is fighting the negative stigma that programs such as these are a punishment rather than a privilege for at-risk youth. Problems such as these are a common encounter for most types of intervention programs and solutions are continually trying to be found.

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that being a part of the GEARS mentoring program has a positive impact on the at-risk youth participants. GEARS participants reported having better grades, relationships, attitudes, and aspirations. The participants found that after joining GEARS, they completed their homework which led them to getting better grades. Mentees’ parents were proud of them for getting better grades, which improved their relationship. The students learned from their mentors to be more respectful to others. After participating in the GEARS program, some students even stated that they had higher aspirations for themselves than they did before

the program. The secondary data also shows better academic outcomes for participating students such as a decrease in the number of students with failing marks.

Due to the limited size of the GEARS program, further research would be necessary to see the overall impact mentoring has on participants over an extended period of time. This research would be crucial to proving that intervention programs such as mentoring are working to close the achievement gap between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Ideally, the study group would need to be larger. A more detailed study that contains control groups of participating and nonparticipating students would provide more conclusive data. These students would be followed throughout schooling in both academic and nonacademic areas, such as those used in this study. Overall, a larger study would yield a more in depth evaluation of mentoring programs and the effect they have on at-risk youth.

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