

Closing the Achievement Gap for Black Males: A Comparative Study on Youth Mentoring Programs

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This qualitative study presents preliminary analyses of adult mentoring (AM) and peer mentoring (PM) programs in a large, diverse urban school district. The programs are dedicated to facilitating the success of Black male students, with a specific focus on the factors that contribute to student success and program effectiveness. Within a districtwide initiative to foster Black male achievement, PM and/or AM programs are being implemented in all schools. From an ecological systems theory perspective, the investigation explores program structures, mentor training, implementation, and support within schools and plans to assess how mentees, mentors, program staff, administrators, and parents view the programs. The aims of this study are to describe the programmatic differences between the AM and PM programs. This research will be of interest to schools and school districts engaged in programs to facilitate Black male achievement.

Keywords: qualitative study, youth mentoring programs, Black male students

The Problem

Educational statistics regarding Black boys are alarming. Academic challenges are seen in suspensions, expulsions, teacher referrals, truancy, not achieving at grade level, and low high school graduation rates (Greene, 2013; Noguera, 2012; Saunders, Davis, Williams, & Williams, 2004; Teasley & Lee, 2006; Welch, 2013).

In 2009-10 the national graduation rate for Black male students from urban areas was less than 50% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010), while the graduation rate for White, non-Latino males was 78% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). Employment, earnings, incomes, and social difficulties, including incarceration, are encountered when young adults lack high school diplomas or equivalencies, and this is a particularly intractable problem among Black males (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010).

Review of the Literature

Youth mentoring is cited as a powerful strategy and preventative tool to reach at-risk children and adolescents (Cavell et al., 2009). At-risk youth participating in school-based mentoring programs have shown improvements in academics, behavior, and psychosocial adjustment (Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011). Karcher and Dubois (2005) note different aspects of mentoring that

support the goal of developing the skills of the mentee, specifically three core elements: (a) the wisdom or experience differential between the mentor and mentee, (b) the expectation that guidance and/or instruction are provided, and (c) the development of an emotional connection (Karcher & Dubois, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's 1979 ecological systems theory conceptualizes peer mentoring relationships, explicating levels, or layers of environment have particular effects on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2005). The influence of the family unit, the connections through mentoring activities, the impact of the environment experienced by the students, and the indirect influences of cultures and beliefs systems have a significant impact on how students develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2005). Therefore, students participating in peer mentoring are impacted not only by their immediate environment, but their interaction with the larger environment. The framework is utilized to facilitate an understanding of the role mentoring plays as a preventative tool in reaching the district's Black male students. This study will explore the relationship between adult and peer mentoring programs from the perspective of ecological systems theory.

Research Methods

This qualitative study examines the district's AM and PM programs in regard to programmatic similarities and differences and factors expected to contribute to programmatic and student success. The investigation will also articulate program structures, mentor training, implementation of the program in new schools, support within schools, as well as fidelity of implementation of the program across schools and grade levels. The overarching study will employ a mixed-methods approach that will capture data from stakeholders (i.e., mentees, mentors, program staff, administrators, and parents). Individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and online surveys will be the primary data gathering techniques.

Data Sources

Sources of data that contribute to Year 1 findings include (1) initial semi-structured interviews with the two mentoring program coordinators, (2) engagement with program personnel in programmatic leadership meetings, (3) observations of community task force meetings, and

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(4) program documents. These early findings will inform the development of surveys and focus group/interview questions for Year 2 of the study.

Results

The main objective of this study was to identify the programmatic similarities and differences between the adult and peer mentoring programs in this school district. Preliminary qualitative analysis of program coordinator interviews indicates specific programmatic components that allow for comparisons. Findings are presented by program for the purpose of comparison (Appendix).

Peer Mentoring Program

The PM program was developed in 2010 out of an identified need for positive role models for underperforming Black male students. Teachers piloted this program as a group mentoring model, where high performing Black male students were selected and trained to be mentors for younger peers who were struggling. The success of the program captured district attention, and served as the basis for a successful grant application. PM design was based upon the literature that addresses Black male learning styles, and the premises that Black males are relational, competitive, and lack Black role models. With grant support, PM was implemented in two additional schools, and is currently being scaled up to additional schools, with no dedicated funding. The program has also been revised to now serve K-12, with successful older students mentoring younger at-risk peers within elementary, middle, and high schools. Program staff identify, recruit, and train high achieving Black males as mentors, while at-risk mentees are identified and assigned peer mentors. One goal of the PM program is directly related to increasing mentees' grade point average and making progress toward graduating on time, with the ultimate goal of impacting school culture so that Black male students will exhibit positive attitudes towards achieving. PM's rapid scale up resulted from an enthusiastic response to an initial introductory training to school administrators and social workers. The rapid scale up has resulted in a need to develop training protocols for adults on how to facilitate a peer led initiative.

Adult Mentoring Program

A long-standing district initiative, the AM program provides one-to-one or group mentoring for ultra-high risk K-12 students by school staff or community members. The AM model incorporates both school-based and community-based mentoring programs. Ultra-high risk students have a history of being at least two years behind their peers academically; chronic absences; juvenile justice issues; homelessness; or behavioral infractions. For this in-school mentoring program, volunteers work with students during the school day or afterschool programs. Adult mentors must pass a background screening and participate in training, which occurs on school campuses during the school day. District support includes working with the

schools to set up schedules for implementing manageable mentoring programs. Mentor coordinators support mentoring relationships within each school.

Although the district has adopted a specific mentoring model, it is believed that schools have adopted a variety of programs. This yields questions in regard to mentoring models being used, infrastructures within schools, program logistics, and processes for identifying mentees. A reported district challenge is the frequent substitution of mentors as tutors within schools, so that tutoring is not differentiated from mentoring. Additional concerns arise when school staff are mandated to serve as mentors, with questions addressing how mentoring affects expectations regarding work time and duties, as well as personal time.

Moving Forward: Minority Male Mentoring Initiative

At the present time, the District has integrated the original free-standing adult and peer mentoring programs into a three tiered model (below) that serves the needs of ultra-high risk students, high achieving students, and middle-tier students who are neither high achieving nor at-risk, but who could benefit from additional supports.

- Peer-to-Peer Mentoring
 - At-risk students who are off-track to graduation, but believed to be able to benefit from positive peer support are mentees.
 - High-achieving minority male students who have demonstrated leadership and are believed to have the skills to be successful mentors serve as mentors to the students described above.
- One-on-One or Small Group Mentoring
 - Ultra high risk students, as defined in the model, are mentees.
 - These students are mentored by an adult mentor who is a District employee
- Group Mentoring
 - Middle tier students, who do not fall into either of the at-risk categories but who it is believed could benefit from mentoring, are the mentees.
 - These students are mentored by an adult mentor from the community.

Conclusions

The district's strategic plan is focused on increasing the number of at-risk Black males who successfully transition between elementary, middle school, high school, and college or career. The goal of all program is to increase the number of Black male students graduating on time, going to college, or earning a post-secondary degree or credential. In regard to the district's theory of change, mentoring functions as an intervention where students' relationships become more positive and impact a change in their developmental paths. It is believed that mentoring provides opportunities for growth by altering existing dysfunctional processes. While the PM program has the direct goal of impacting academic performance, the AM program posits an indirect outcome to improving students'

academic performance by improving attendance, attitudes, and confidence.

Both the AM and PM programs cite challenges related to implementation within schools, although the challenges revolve around different issues. Both coordinators address the detrimental effects of unsupportive staff, where the mentoring programs are mandated in the absence of staff support, especially where school staff organize the PM program and are expected to act as mentors in the AM program. The district is restructuring how programs are implemented and have been responsive to concerns regarding school and community volunteers. For example, flexible scheduling can address staff issues related to time spent mentoring, and reaching out to local businesses and organizations can be a solution to recruiting community members. Another noted issue is the need for the peer mentors to also have mentors. The original PM group, which began with 13 students, was actually a three-tiered model where the teacher/moderator also acted as the adult mentor for the peer mentors. However, as this program has scaled up, the absence of adult mentors to support the peer mentors has been noted. It is unclear whether this will be addressed in the new merged program.

Adequate training is important for youth mentoring programs to run successfully, but this study reveals that solidifying this process and fidelity of implementation across schools is a needed area within both programs. The AM program has structured training procedures, however the training procedures for outside community based organizations is unknown.

Educational Significance of the Work

Despite a great deal of attention and widespread attempts at amelioration, racial/ethnic disproportionalities in education persist (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Research Council, 2002; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2007). If mentoring at-risk students has the potential to impact disproportionality at the individual level, then a districtwide initiative, implemented in a large, diverse, urban district has the potential to have a major impact. Mentoring programs that are strategically designed to be culturally responsive (Klingner et al., 2005; Vincent et al., 2011; Voltz et al., 2003) have the potential to be particularly successful with our most at-risk group, Black male students. Findings will be reported to the district to support data-driven decisions that can facilitate successful outcomes for Black male students. The findings identify and outline strategies that facilitate closing achievement gaps for Black males, including academic performance, graduation rates and time to graduation. The fundamental assumption is that elevating outcomes for the most challenged groups will ultimately benefit all students.

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Presenters

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Appendix
Programmatic Components of Peer Mentoring (PM) and Adult Mentoring (AM) by Program

Programmatic Components	Peer Mentoring Program	Adult Mentoring Program
History of the Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed by high school teachers ; • A grant enabled growth, and through scale up has spread to a number of new schools with no funding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A long standing program within the district, where adult mentors include school staff and volunteers from the community.
Mentoring Program Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group led peer mentoring • peer-to-peer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One adult-to-one student • Small group
Program Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifically designed with knowledge on how to impact Black males and Black male learning styles. • Program emphasizes the development of the mentors, as well as the mentees. • District grant staff works with the schools and provides training on how to start the program within schools . • Program point of contact within the school is the graduation coach (i.e., social worker). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusively an in-school mentoring program, where mentors come in during the school day and work with the students. • When staff are incorporated as mentors, then district support includes training, working with the schools to set up schedules for mentoring, and help make the program more manageable. • Program point of contact within the school is the mentor coordinators (i.e., social worker or guidance counselor).
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer security issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District security and clearance process
Identification of Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program identifies at-risk students to be mentored and identifies high achieving student mentors to serve them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program identifies ultra-high risk students to be mentored and identifies adult mentors to serve them.
Mentor Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District-level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District-level
Theory of Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impacts the entire school, creating a positive culture that celebrates academics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An indirect outcome to improving students' academic performance, while curriculum and support staff impact students' academic performance.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns include how to train adults to facilitate a peer led initiative and how to support the relationship between mentors and the mentees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns and questions arise when school staff are mandated to serve as mentors. • Challenges include mentors being substituted for tutors in schools, where this is not their purpose.
Future of the Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving toward a three tiered mentoring model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating mentoring subsets • Collaborating with the school's local community institutions and business to provide unique opportunities.