The Impact of Mentoring School-Aged Youth Facing Challenges in School

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ABSTRACT

According to Owings (1988), the term "at-risk" refers to a student who is more likely to fail in school based on factors such as low academic achievement, attendance, or behavioral issues, however other factors place students at-risk, such as substance abuse, violence, trauma, and involvement with the criminal justice system. This literature review examines the impact of mentoring as an intervention to support students who are facing academic, social, or emotional challenges in school. These students may be at greater risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). There is a gap in the literature on how mentoring programs can promote positive outcomes both in and out of school among students who are at greater risk of entering the STPP. As in higher education, students in K-12 schools benefit from specific support to promote successful outcomes. With the widespread increase of zero-tolerance policies, students are often suspended, or even expelled, at alarming rates and, as a result, miss valuable hours of instructional time. Historically, students were excluded from school for behavior such as fighting, assault, harassment, vandalism, and destruction of school property (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006). Under zero-tolerance policies, students are also excluded from school for non-violent behavior, such as verbal harassment, disobedience, insubordination, obscene language, and truancy (Marsh, 2014). This literature review focuses on zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the impact

Brianna M. Jones

of mentoring on school-aged youth as an intervention to support those who are facing challenges in school.

     Keywords: Youth, mentoring, academic achievement, zero-tolerance, school-to-prison pipeline, suspensions, and expulsions.

INTRODUCTION

The Impact of Zero-Tolerance Policies on Academic Achievement

     Zero-tolerance policies usually include harsh disciplinary consequences in the form of either short or long-term suspensions or expulsion. These disciplinary actions can often include arrest or referral to juvenile or adult court (Heitzeg, 2008). These students fall behind academically, often leading to them dropping out of school, which limits their employment options. Students who have limited options might work full or part-time at a low-wage job, sell or take drugs, or attempt to learn a trade. Many students who are disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance policies are minorities, low-income youth, and students with disabilities. Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, and Daftary-Kapur (2013) reported that minority students are suspended four times more often than White students. Additionally, because boys are twice as likely as girls to experience these consequences, the rates of Black and Latino boys who are suspended or expelled are extremely high. Students with learning disabilities are also three times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than those without a disability (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). Implementing fair, effective, and consistent discipline in school is important. To an extent, it maintains a productive environment, improves culture and climate, and minimizes disruption in the classrooms (Kang-Brown et al., 2013).

     The Justice Policy Institute (2009) and The Advancement Project (2005) have reported multiple cases of unnecessarily harsh discipline (as cited by Heitzeg, 2008). For example, a 17-year-old junior shot a paper clip at a peer, but accidently hit a staff member. He was expelled from school. A 12-year-old who had attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder told his classmates he would "get them" when they ate all the potatoes at lunch. This student

was suspended for two days and then referred to the police on "terrorism" charges. He was then incarcerated for two weeks while awaiting trial.

Academic and Community Mentoring Programs

Karcher, Davis, and Powell (2002) found that adolescents' environments, abilities, behaviors, and even disabilities vary. If any of these factors jeopardizes their academic success, they are at greater risk for underachievement. Having a mentor can provide a strong and consistent relationship between a student and a caring adult (Karcher et al., 2002; Walker & Freedman, 1996). A mentor may serve as a role model or provide advice, academic, social, and emotional support. Through the sharing of values and beliefs, mentors can promote positive outcomes both in and out of school and help students foster strong relationships with peers, teachers, and their families (Karcher et al. 2002).

Mentoring and academic achievement. Lampley and Johnson (2010) collected data from 54 students at Northeast Tennessee Middle School. The students who participated were involved in a mentoring program called Linking Individual Students to Educational Needs (LISTEN). Criteria for student participation in LISTEN included: 1) failure of one or more school years, 2) obtaining 10 or more discipline referrals in one school year, or 3) having 10 or more unexcused absences in one school year. These criteria were defined as at-risk behaviors (Lampley & Johnson, 2010). The participant ages ranged from 11-15 years; of the 35 boys in the study, 21% were sixth graders, 42% were seventh graders, and 37% eighth graders. The study collected data over a 6-week period during the 2004-05 school year and compared the LISTEN students' grade point average (GPA), discipline referrals, and attendance rates to the same criteria from 2003-04 to 2004-05. Results showed that 51 of the 54 students had improved GPAs. Additionally, 51 of the 54 students had fewer discipline referrals at the end of the 2004-05 school year, compared to the 2003-04 school year.

School-based mentoring (SBM) is growing rapidly. School-based mentors build strong support relationships with students that grow over time. Meetings typically occur after school, and, depending on the mentor's schedule, these meetings might last 3-4 hours each week.

Brianna M. Jones

Most students participate in SBM programs between the ages of 9 and 16, when school-related and personal challenges make them vulnerable to academic, social, and behavioral problems. Many SBM programs begin in the fourth grade because students learn to read between grades 1 and 3; afterward, they must be able to read in order to learn (Chall & Jacobs, 2014). After third grade, children without reading skills are more likely to experience ongoing learning problems. Children at this age begin to develop a sense of personal competence and begin to compare their accomplishments to those of their peers (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). Children experiencing academic challenges may feel inadequate and disengaged in school, resulting in academic failure.

Teens entering junior high school experience major changes in school structure and their adult/peer relationships. They have more autonomy than in elementary school, but these transitions can lead to uncertainty, low self-confidence, and academic disengagement (Eccles, 1993). The goal of most mentoring programs is to help students develop protective factors to cope with their developmental challenges. Children involved in positive, supportive, and nurturing relationships tend to be more independent and self-confident.

Studies have examined the effects of "traditional" community-based mentoring implemented outside of school. Very little research has been conducted to determine whether this major new variant of SBM contributes to student success. School-based mentors use academic support to help realign the children's attitudes toward learning (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Evidence suggests that those with academic mentors have better attendance than their peers and describe themselves as being more competent and confident about their school work. (Karcher et al., 2002; Tierney & Branch, 1992; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995)

Data from other programs that focus on educational achievement support these findings. Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS), Career Beginnings, Raising Ambition Instills Self-Esteem (RAISE), and Sponsor-a-Scholar reported that their participants had improved school attendance. Jekielek, Moore, Hair, and Scarupa (2002) reported that BBBS participants had fewer unexcused absences than a control group. Career Beginnings, a program that

34

targets 11th-12th grade students and prepares them for higher education and employment, found that approximately 53% of their participants attended college for at least one year after high school. Jekielek et al. (2002) also found that mentored students had better attitudes about education than non-mentored youth. Participants in BBBS had better relationships with their parents and teachers and communicated more openly. Many earned better grades, improved as students, and were more likely to attend college and less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol (Jekielek et al., 2002).

Big Brothers Big Sisters. Support, guidance, and nurturing from adults are vital to the academic and social success of young people. This type of support gives adolescents the opportunity to become responsible, reliable, and successful adults. BBBS facilitates meaningful and long-lasting relationships between children and adults by matching non-familial volunteers with participants. The volunteer and mentee commit to meeting for three to four hours, several times a month; matching occurs through an extensive intake process. Grossman and Tierney (1998) examined the effectiveness of the program by studying eight agencies from different regions, including Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California. These sample agencies were among the largest in the BBBS federation (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). The impact of BBBS was determined by comparing a control group with those who had a Big Brother or Big Sister over an 18-month period. A total of 1,138 children enrolled in the study, with an age range of 10-16 years.

Sample Composition

	Treatment	Control	Total
# of students randomly assigned	571	567	1,138
# of students with baseline surveys	554 (97.0%)	553 (97.5%)	1,107 (97.3%)
# of students in the analysis sample	487 (85.3%)	472 (83.2%)	959 (84.3%)

(Grossman & Tierney, 1998)

Table 1 shows that 1,107 of the 1,138 BBBS participants completed the baseline interview, and 959 of the interviews were fully completed (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Table 2 reports the participants' gender, race, and age.

Brianna M. Jones

Table 2. *Race/Gender and Age of Participants by Treatment Status*

Characteristics	Treatments	Controls	Overall
Race/Gender (%)			
Minority Girls	21.8	23.6	22.7
White Girls	15.6	14.0	14.9
Minority Boys	33.1	35.1	34.1
White Boys	29.4	35.1	28.3
Age Baseline (%)			
10	10.1	10.8	10.4
11	24.4	24.4	24.4
12	25.5	22.3	23.9
13	20.1	21.2	20.7
14	13.1	15.0	14.1
15	5.5	5.3	5.4
16	1.2	1.1	1.2
Number of Students	**487**	**472**	**959**

(Grossman & Tierney, 1998)

Providing adolescents with good role models may help them with challenging personal situations, assist them with thinking through decisions, and help them become more socially involved (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Grossman and Tierney (1998) also found that children who were assigned a Big Brother or Big Sister were less likely to use illegal drugs, while approximately 11.47% of the control group were shown to engage in drug use. The study concluded that BBBS participants also earned slightly better grades than the control group, with an average GPA of 2.71. Results indicated that having a Big Brother or Big Sister was beneficial to children and often improved their relationship with their parents.

BBBS is so successful that the waiting list to match volunteers with African American boys can be up to five years or more, thus leaving a void for this population. In order to address this need, some schools and communities engage in "drive-by" mentoring. According to the Florida Mental Health Institute (1995), "drive-by mentoring" takes place when mentors spend only short periods of time with a child, then return to their other commitments (as cited by Porta &

The Impact of Mentoring School-Aged Youth
Facing Challenges in School

Struchen, 1996). These mentors fail the child by disregarding their commitments, making the child feel unwanted or unloved (Porta & Struchen, 1996). According to Freedman (1993), two barriers prevent successful mentor-youth matches: a lack of time dedicated to the relationship and social detachment, or a lack of understanding of the child's socioeconomic challenges (as cited by Porta & Struchen, 1996).

The most successful mentors are those who are not already committed to multiple responsibilities. Many potential mentors, including professionals in education, medicine, and other professions, have too many commitments to mentor effectively (Porta & Struchen, 1996). Mentor screening should include a rigorous assessment of their available time, cultural sensitivity, and knowledge of the child's community. Mentors who come from the children's neighborhood may continue to engage in friendly interactions when the formal mentoring relationship ends (Freedman, as cited in Porta & Struchen, 1996). A mentoring program in St. Petersburg, Florida, asked African American boys what they seek in a mentor; the children reported that honesty, keeping promises, and following through with plans were some of their most desired traits (Porta & Struchen, 1996). Children need mentors who will serve as role models and encourage them to be better and to do better. They need adults to tell them they are proud of them and their accomplishments.

Mentoring in Social Work Theory

Recent social work theory proposes the use of three approaches in the development of successful mentoring programs. These approaches offer ideas that may serve as a multi-tiered approach to promoting the success of young people.

Self-actualization. Self-actualization occurs when a person's individual potential and talents are realized through "a therapeutic relationship [that] offers a way out of bad faith and into a state of freedom and the opportunity to 'actualize' what we believe our true selves to be…" (Howe, 2009, p.163-164). A mentoring relationship should be therapeutic to the young person facing challenges in the home, school, or larger community. According to Howe (2009), counseling helps individuals address their challenges and understand their full potential. Nelson-Jones (1995) asserted that in the right circumstances and under proper supervision children

Brianna M. Jones

with mentors can avoid being "controlled by external forces" (as cited by Howe, 2009, p.164). The child may be free to make individual decisions without fear of being judged or punished for making a mistake. As children gain self-actualization, they learn self-reliance, take responsibility for their actions, and begin to speak up for themselves. With effective mentoring, the child will seek to achieve more and ask for help, when needed (Howe, 2009).

A person-centered approach. Rogers (1986) based his person-centered approach on his work with emotionally challenged individuals. His research showed that those who experienced love for what they accomplish rather than for being themselves were more likely to experience self-doubt and internal tension (as cited by Howe, 2009). Rogers identified a number of "core conditions" as the basis for valuable mentor-mentee relationships.

Figure 1. The Person-Centered Approach Core Conditions (Williamson, 2017)

The core conditions. Rogers found that strong mentoring relationships are built on an understanding of the mentee's environment, health (physical, emotional, mental, etc.), communication skills, and social activities (as cited by Howe, 2009). Warmth, empathy, and genuineness, along with respect,

38

positive regard, concreteness, and immediacy, are also critical factors in mentoring success (Howe, 2009). Mutual respect should be sought between the mentor and mentee; the mentor should guide the mentee toward a sense of agency and the courage to change his or her own life. Concreteness, honesty, and the willingness to practice "immediacy," or confronting the 'here and now' issues that the mentee faces, are very important (Howe, 2009). The goal of the person-centered approach is to build a strong and mutually beneficial relationship between the mentor and mentee.

The strengths perspective. The strengths perspective asks that we see a person's individual qualities beyond the social barriers they may encounter (Howe, 2009). Children with dyslexia, for example, may experience difficulties in receiving a high-quality education because of negative attitudes about their disability. Used in mentoring, the strengths perspective promotes success beyond the disability by building the child's resilience (Howe, 2009).

Resilience is an individual's ability to handle risks, overcome obstacles, and function under pressure. According to Garmezy, Matsen, Nordstrom, and Terrorese (1979), resilience was first studied in the 1970s (as cited in Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006). Recent research includes the strengths perspective in resilience studies. Connell, Spencer, and Aber (1994) and Wang and Gordon (1994) studied children who achieved socially and academically despite exposure to negative external factors (as cited in Broussard et al., 2006). Dumont and Provost (1999) found that children's resilience increased if the child experienced at least one trusting relationship with an adult.

Broussard et al. (2006) noted that children go to school every day facing different learning, behavioral, emotional, and social challenges, which sometimes increase their risk of academic underachievement. Approximately 18% of students repeat a grade each year due to academic failure. The National Association of School Psychologists Program (2003) shows that 30% to 50% of students repeat at least one grade before attending high school, increasing their likelihood of dropping out (as cited by Broussard et al., 2006). Children benefit from support in dealing with the life challenges that contribute to failure in school.

Brianna M. Jones

Figure 2. The Strengths Perspective (Pegg, 2019)

Saleebey (1997) found recognizing the mentee's strengths and showing genuine interest in their circumstances builds the trust necessary to help them overcome adversity and make positive changes. Saleebey identified five types of questions critical to this process: A *survival* question seeks to understand what has changed in the mentee's life and how they coped. *Support questions* ask parents to recognize what they have gained from their life experience, while *exception* questions focus on specific moments from the past the mentee would like to recapture. *Possibility questions* ask the mentee to envision a better future, and *esteem questions* celebrate the mentee's accomplishments or positive qualities. A mentor who uses these questions in a strengths-based approach will assist mentees in gaining confidence, resilience, and increased chances for long-term success.

CONCLUSION

In this literature review, I have reviewed the impact of zero-tolerance policies, academic achievement, and how mentoring may help young people facing academic challenges. Research has shown that mentoring helps improve social and academic outcomes. Programs such as BBBS, LISTEN, and RAISE have had positive

40

results in student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. BBBS also demonstrated that those who are mentored are less likely to use drugs and alcohol. BBBS promotes a long-lasting relationship between adults and young people.

Zero-tolerance policies negatively impact poor and minority students. Students are still being suspended and expelled at alarming rates and missing valuable hours of instruction. When harsh disciplinary measures are used and limited supports are available, these students fall behind, both academically and socially. There are better ways to hold them accountable and help them understand that their actions have consequences, such as counseling, restorative practices, or simply having a mentor to guide them.

Young people who begin to be mentored between the ages of 9 and 16 are given the tools to face their academic, social, and behavioral problems. An effective mentor understands and responds to their needs, recognizes their strengths, listens well, and assists the young person in focusing on positive outcomes. More research is needed to understand the impact that mentoring has on at-risk youth, but evidence shows that young people can greatly benefit from a positive mentor relationship.

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Brianna M. Jones

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