



acycjournal.pitt.edu

ISSN: 2641-3450 (online) and 0741-9481 (print)

DOI 10.5195/jcycw.2020.12

Vol. 26, Fall 2020

Perceptions of Mentors and Mentees in School-based Cross-Age Peer Mentoring in a Low-income Rural Community

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Abstract

Cross-age peer mentoring programs are not always effective, and some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of this model. In this article, we use evaluation data to describe a project that has been going for twenty years. The project enrolls high school students as mentors to struggling elementary school students. The article reviews the current literature and details the perceptions of mentors and mentees regarding relational and academic benefits and disappointments. Both mentors and mentees report that the project gave them purpose, motivation, and a sense of belonging in the school and community. They also describe frustrations and regrets. Some findings echo previous studies; however, by presenting a twenty-year retrospective, and including mentor and mentee voices, the article provides a unique contribution to the field. The article provides an appendix with resources and recommendations for effective practices to those seeking to implement such a program.

Key Words: Cross-age peer mentoring, adolescent development, social and emotional support, future orientation, youth leadership, rural schools, rural communities

Introduction

The bell rings and high school mentors make their way to the guidance office for their bi-weekly mentoring supervision meeting. There is relaxed joking and chatting, sharing granola bars and apples and, soon, the group is ready to tackle the agenda written on the white board. The guidance office is a large, welcoming space, with couches, comfortable chairs, and shelves cluttered with games and books. Each day, dozens of middle and high school students cross the threshold, bringing with them a full range of emotion—eager stories of accomplishment and anxious self-consciousness, frenetic energy and deep sadness, idealism and dismissive distance, generosity and rage. During a recent visit, as we listened to mentors describe their role, it became clear that they strive to hold a steady, calm space in the center of this whirlwind.

These bi-weekly mentor meetings have been happening since the Teen Mentor Project was implemented twenty years ago. The six mentors are from grades 10-12; they are trained, supervised, and advised by the school counselor who partners with the program director of a community non-profit. Both advisors join the mentors in lively pre-meeting conversations and then shift the focus to the agenda: check-in about mentoring concerns, decide on a quote for this year's t-shirt, confirm plans for the holiday gathering for all mentors and mentees, and make sure mentoring logs are up to date. The advisors rarely insert their own opinion. In fact, the school counselor physically moves out of the circle for part of the meeting, giving the mentors full rein on the direction and content of the meeting.

Now, almost mid-way through the year, the tone, quality, and depth of conversation suggest that the group of mentors are aware of their role within the school—a role that goes beyond mentoring younger students toward taking responsibility for setting an inclusive and respectful climate in the school as a whole. For example, one mentor wants to talk about their initiative, “Say the Word to End the Word”—an effort to stop verbal abuse based on race, ability, gender, and sexual orientation. Mentors actively participate in the planning and decision-making process, and they have effectively integrated the principles and interpersonal skills that this project espouses (see the companion article by Martel, Weisbart & San Antonio, in this issue, for a detailed description of program ethics, practices, and structures).

Research Foundation for Youth Mentoring

Mentoring relationships within a “mentor-rich” environment has been hailed as one of the most important assets a school can promote (National Mentoring Partnership, <https://www.mentoring.org/why-mentoring/mentoring-impact/>). However, mentoring is not always effective, and researchers have worked to identify factors that can lead to successful and unsuccessful mentoring relationships. In this section, we briefly review outcome studies on community-based adult-to-youth mentoring, then we discuss youth-to-youth mentoring, and, finally, we report on studies that examine essential qualities of the mentoring relationship.

Adult-to-Youth Mentoring

The first large study of community-based adult-to-youth mentoring was completed in 1995 and published by Public/Private Ventures in the Big Brother/Big Sister Report by Tierney and Grossman. They found that one-to-one mentoring can make a difference for both boys and girls of all racial backgrounds. Mentees were 46% less likely than their control group counterparts to initiate drug use, and 27% less likely to initiate alcohol use during the study period. They missed half as many days of school, felt more confident in their ability to do well academically, and received slightly higher grades. They also reported more positive relationships with friends and with parents. In a review of studies completed on 10 mentoring programs nation-wide, Jekielek, Hair, Moore, & Scarupa (2002) also found positive outcomes. As a whole, mentees in these programs showed better school attitudes and school attendance, increased college enrollment, decreased use of drugs and alcohol, and improved social attitudes and relationships. Youth that benefited the most from mentoring were those that were most at-risk due to life circumstances. However, they did not find a clear pattern of evidence to support increased sense of self-worth or improved grades. Finally, a meta-analysis of 73 independent studies, found that, overall, mentoring can have positive effects in behavioral, social, emotional, and even academic realms for children and adolescents alike; however, the authors cautioned that benefits may not be sustained over time (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn & Valentine, 2011).

Cross-age Peer Mentoring

Over the last thirty years, enlisting high school students in a variety of helping roles, such as peer mediators, tutors, and peer counselors, has gained and lost momentum depending on the shifting focus of funding priorities. However, by 2008, as many as half of Big Brother/Big Sister mentors were high school students (Herrera, Kauh, Cooney, Grossman, & McMaken, 2008). Still, there is very little process and outcome research on school-based cross-age peer mentoring (Karcher & Berger, 2017), and, of the studies that exist, few of them focus on rural places or follow a program for multiple years. The two rural studies we found showed mixed results for student mentees.

Karcher (2005) reported positive gains in connectedness to school and to parents; however, this study also showed negative effects on self-esteem when mentors were inconsistent. Kraus & Cleveland (2016) found statistically significant increases in future orientation for mentored students in an impoverished rural area, but no difference in school connectedness between mentored students and non-mentored students.

A few studies have focused on the effects of cross-age peer mentoring in particular groups. For example, Johnson, Simon, & Mun (2014) found that graduation rates increased among Latino males when they were involved in a peer-led high school transition program. Examining school climate and intergroup relationships, Karcher, Brown, & Elliott (2004) noted promising results when high school students mentored younger students in areas such as academic confidence, school transitions, and ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural awareness. They concluded with a call to “facilitate developmental intervention programs that help peers to support one another, model and encourage one another’s social skills development, and facilitate interpersonal understanding across age, gender, cultural, and peer groups” (p. 207).

Jucovy & Herrera (2009) summarized the major findings of the BB/BS study and described both strengths and potential problems when teens mentor younger children. High school mentors were more likely than adult mentors to include their mentees in decisions about activities, which led to a more satisfying connection, but high school mentors missed more mentoring sessions than adult mentors, possibly due to home, school, and work commitments. They also found that when mentors sought guidance from program staff it improved their chances of good outcomes with mentees.

High school mentors that perceived themselves to be successful in their mentoring relationship, also benefitted from their experience. Karcher (2009) studied whether high school mentors would show changes in connectedness, attachment, and self-esteem between fall and spring. He found that, “Youth who participated as cross-age peer mentors reported larger fall to spring gains in school-related connectedness and self-esteem than the comparison group of peers” (p. 297).

In a review of the research literature from 1990 to 2013, Petosa & Smith (2014) highlighted findings that give reason to be optimistic about cross-age peer mentoring as an effective intervention strategy for both mentees and mentors. Mentees reported a decrease in problem behaviors, such as gang membership and fighting, smoking, and drug use, and mentors reported that they would be more likely to enlist the support of a trusted adult when they felt vulnerable or had suicidal thoughts. Christopher St. Vil (2018) also found benefits for both mentors and mentees but, importantly, this study asserted that cross-age peer mentoring was a *particularly* helpful intervention for students who were educationally disengaged. Overall, the literature shows that cross-age peer mentoring, when it is well-designed and carefully guided, is an effective way to support older students’ sense of competence and future goals, and younger students’ relationships with school adults and with their peers. At a time when white nationalist groups are increasingly using the Internet to recruit vulnerable adolescents looking for adventure, a cause, or ways to do something influential and notable, a supportive mentoring relationship with an older student might an effective preventive measure.

The Mentoring Relationship

An essential aspect of mentoring is the development of a high-quality emotional bond between mentor and mentee. Benefits to mentees, such as those described above, occurred when mentees perceived a strong, stable bond with their mentor, expressed through trust, care, and respect (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Jekielek, Hair, Moore, & Scarupa, 2002). Typically, youth are referred to mentoring because they are struggling socially, emotionally, and academically. They are often young people that lack secure attachment with adults, are disengaged at school, experience disruptive home lives, have learning disabilities, and/or difficult relationships with peers. Facing challenges like these, they are often pre-disposed to disappointment and hurt. A reliable, strong connection between mentor and mentee can boost self-esteem; however, when the mentoring relationship is weak, because of inconsistent contact and/or lack of a secure and meaningful connection, the mentee experiences something that can do more harm than good (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, Valentine, 2011; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Schwartz, Lowe, & Rhodes, 2012).

Some researchers explored complex relationship-building processes in mentoring, such as reciprocity and cross-race relationships. Herrera, Sipe, and McClanahan (2000) found that when mentors invested in a mutual relationship, guided by the interests and expectations of the mentee, the bond was deeper, lasted longer, and the relationship was perceived to be of higher quality. Cross-race mentoring matches can work well but require

cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural communication skills on the part of the mentor, and programmatic diversity awareness (Sanchez, Colon-Torres, Feuer, Roundfield, Berardi, 2005). Typically, mentor pairs are the same gender; however, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Schwartz, & Olsho (2014) studied a growing number of programs that match female mentors with male mentees and found similar relationship processes and outcomes as in same-gender mentor pairs.

Methodology

The Teen Mentor Project described in this article has been carefully evaluated over the last 20 years using both process and outcome evaluation tools and a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. Early in the implementation process, the project evaluation was developed using mentoring evaluation protocols described by Nakkula & Harris, 2005. For the purpose of this article, we will primarily focus on the analysis of qualitative data and descriptive statistics described below. A full description of project history and structure, community and school contexts, mentor recruitment and training protocols, activities, and evaluation plan can be found in the companion article, "A 20-year retrospective on implementing cross-age peer mentoring in a low-income rural community: A school-youth program-community partnership."

Participants

Each year, the Teen Mentor Project has at least 16 participants—eight high school mentors and eight mentees (occasionally one or two more mentees are enrolled). Mentees are 10- to 13-years old, in grades five through eight. They are students who show indications of social, emotional, and/or academic vulnerability or distress. Referrals come from teachers, parents, peers, school counselors, mentors, and staff of a community-based youth development program. Mentors are 15- to 18-year-old high school students in grades 10 through 12; they are selected through a written application, recommendation, and interview process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Evaluation data were drawn from focus groups with mentors and mentees, observations, and questionnaires completed by mentors, mentees, parents, and teachers. Early in the program, we examined discipline, attendance, and grade records before, during, and after program participation. Mentors and mentees often returned to visit the Mentor Project staff after graduation and, in this way, we have been able to track education and employment for some project participants.

To prepare this article, we reviewed observation and focus group notes, evaluation questionnaires, and program documents and reports from 1998 to 2017. The findings below draw on early numerical data and more recent narrative data. We used the written words of 15 mentors and 8 mentees, with twice as many girls as boys. This purposive sample of 23 students represents the project participants for whom we have the most detailed written responses that reflect the perceptions of others in the group. In addition, we report on focus groups with an additional 8 participants. In these group conversations, we used open questions, giving us the opportunity to follow the direction of the research participants. The authors shared their interpretations with each other to increase the reliability of our findings. Evaluation reports, participant narratives and written responses on questionnaires were read multiple times and hand-coded using thematic analysis and code development described by Boyatzis (1998).

Limitations

While our research draws from a variety of people, using a variety of means, and while we have the benefit of twenty years of experience, our results concerning the perspectives of mentees and parents of mentees are limited. We believe this is due to developmental and wellness factors; mentees were less inclined to write or speak more than a few words and their parents were often highly stressed and less involved in the school community. Future qualitative research should probe deeper for the perspectives and meaning-making of mentees in cross-age peer mentoring relationships. In particular, there is a need to better understand cross-gender and cross-race relationships.

Current Questions and Purposes

This article responds to these questions: How do mentors and mentees perceive the qualities, purposes, and shortcomings of the mentoring relationship? We were especially attentive to evidence of “reciprocal transformation” described by Nakkula & Ravitch (1998)—how the relationship bond catalyzed developmental changes in mentees as well as mentors, and how they valued, interpreted, and articulated these changes.

Findings

Evaluations based on teacher and parent reports in the first years of the project showed strong results, including better attendance and improved peer and home relationships. This is good news, but we were eager to learn more about why these changes were taking place. How did mentors and mentees understand their mentoring relationships? What did they find meaningful or troubling about their involvement in the project? In the following sections, we use representative quotes to summarize what we learned from interviews, written responses on questionnaires, and focus groups.

Perspectives of Mentors

Mentoring role.

In a recent focus group session, mentors were asked, *What do you do as mentors?* Their response was unequivocal: “We listen.” Someone clarified, “But, sometimes they don’t want to talk so we play a game and then maybe talk.” They were discerning about the instrumental vs. insight-oriented help they give—they help their mentees with homework and staying on task at school, but they also offer more subtle and complex developmental support, such as helping their mentees sort through “friendship drama.” In their comments, the mentors elaborated on the role and purpose of developmental mentoring. For example, they offered these ideas:

Let them figure out who they are and then have the courage to be that person.

This is not time to talk about yourself, but sometimes we can share what might be going on in common.

We are not making a ‘clone’ of ourselves but helping someone be themselves.

As this conversation unfolded it became clear that the mentors guide and teach each other about how to think about their mentoring role. One mentor said, “Sometimes my mentee is having a tough time and he can be nasty to other kids. If I hang out with him and we spend good time together, he can be okay for a week.” And another added, “But, we can’t save them. We can’t count for everything.” They reminded each other to be careful with giving advice: “Try to give them tools to solve their own problems.” They agreed that it depends on what mentees need and it’s important to just be there for them. One mentor summarized this essential relationship quality in this way, “They know that if something is going on in their lives they do not have to solve it or deal with it by themselves.”

When mentors were asked on a questionnaire, *How do you make a difference?* they elaborated on behavioral, social, academic, and emotional well-being. They noted that, because the middle and high school are housed in the same building, the mentees “act better” because they know their mentors might see them. They often noticed that they were able to help their mentees with friendship making skills: “She asks for advice about friends. Before they were fighting all the time, but they don’t anymore.”

As older advisors or role models, they were aware of providing their mentees with support that some families cannot provide. One mentor said, “I’m glad I’m getting to talk to her because her mom did not get a high school diploma and I talk to her about finishing school. She doesn’t have many people pushing her to finish.” Other mentors were also aware that they were sometimes fulfilling roles that might be missing in the lives of mentees. One mentor said, “She tends to forget trips, so I go to her house and she is usually sleeping. I wake her up and get her ready. She goes on most trips that way. Her mom is too busy to remember these things.” We were struck by

her non-judgmental, matter-of-fact way of speaking—an ethic of respect that is woven into the fabric of the Teen Mentor Project.

Beneficial reciprocity in mentoring relationships.

In answer to the question, *How has being a mentor changed you?* mentor narratives affirmed what other researchers have found: cross-age peer mentoring can benefit both mentees and mentors. Several mentors noted that they got better at organizing their time and clarifying their priorities. For example, one mentor said, “I’d be all over the place; I didn’t do things on time. But now I do my homework during study hall so I have time to see [my mentee].” The mentors and mentees often experience reciprocity that moves both of them in new directions. Several mentors commented on how much they learn from their mentees, “I find myself learning things from her even though she is three years younger. She makes me think more about things.”

Mentors and mentees often realized that they have had common life experiences—the death or serious illness of a family member, disrupted home lives, and separation from parents, for example—and they can help each other navigate tough times. When the relationship bond is strong they are able to feel empathy for each other and for themselves, comfort in knowing they are not alone, and a sense of hope by watching each other navigate difficult times. “I was in the same situation as her,” one mentor said; “We talked about how it was similar for her and me. She takes a supportive role in her family and I support her. Her sister looks up to her the way my brother looks up to me.”

Every year, high school students who were mentees in middle school become mentors. One mentor said,

If I didn’t have a mentor [in middle school] I would have went downhill. Not one person in my family is a success. Without a mentor I would not have the help getting through all the drama that goes on in my house. Now people look up to me and it makes me want to keep doing what I am doing to be looked up to.

Others spoke about the way being a mentor expanded their understanding of others and increased their sense of compassion. “Being involved in the program allowed me to see the community in a different light, outside of the bubble of my own family and close friends,” said one mentor. Others also realized that their mentees helped them to consider the perspectives of others and the difficulties that others may face: “You think about how it [home life] affects school performance and how they are feeling.” One mentor noted how compassion spreads: “It makes you more compassionate. And your mentee sees you feeling that way and they take that compassionate attitude on.”

The mentors also became more self-aware and they wanted to set a good example in the school. One explained:

Before I was a mentor I wouldn’t exactly think about what a little kid would think if I did something wrong, but the mentors think about how they act because they don’t want to influence their mentee in a bad way. I always watch what I do in the halls at school because I see her all the time. She’s right there.

Mentors’ bond with each other.

Bi-weekly mentor meetings were a consistent and essential touchpoint, grounding the mentors in their responsibilities toward mentees and also giving them a much-needed peer group to explore their own identities, hardships, values, and aspirations. One mentor said, “Our meetings...were one of the only opportunities I really had to speak with a group of my peers about things that mattered and know that everyone was actively listening and really cared.” They described the “emotional investment” that is required of mentors, and they spoke about ways they mentored each other. A younger mentor said of her slightly older peers, “It’s changed me so much, my values.... I’ve opened up more than at any other time. It’s going to stink when they all leave.” Each year, the mentors say goodbye to those mentors that are graduating, and each year there is concern that it “will be hard to reach the same point with other people.” But most years, the connection develops, the responsibility becomes more real, confidence is gained, and new skills, such as speaking up in a group, are developed.

Changes in school environment.

One mentor described how the mentoring project has changed the school; she said, “We are so passionate about it. We even carry pictures around of our mentees. We are such a small school that everyone knows what is going on...other people want to be a part of it.” When asked about systemic changes the Teen Mentor Project might

catalyze, the mentors articulated ways the project helped with the transition to high school and created a more positive school environment:

It makes the high school more approachable.

The younger kids change and then they come up to the high school and that makes the school better. Sometimes they become mentors and they just pass it on.

We have middle and high school together and we interact in the halls. You don't see much bullying here because there are all these pairs of mentors in the halls...

Several mentors found that when they go to see their mentee at the elementary school they often also engage with their mentees' siblings and other students who are eager to be mentored by a caring older student. Mentors were clear that that the positive aspects of this project, "repeat itself and keeps the community together" and these key themes have been growing more evident over the last twenty years.

Dilemmas, disappointments, and endings.

The school counselor-mentor advisor said, "When we have curve balls thrown at us, we try to refocus on the basics and make sure we do the essentials: strong supervision and consistency with the mentees." All mentoring programs face the reality that sometimes relationships do not work out or they trigger something unexpected and difficult. Along with stories of connection, agency, and altruism, mentors also told stories about feeling stuck, or even anguished, in their mentoring role. Some comments underscored how essential it is to have consistent and skillful guidance and support. One mentor said:

As a mentor, I am not proud of the job I have done. Last year I saw her twice a week, but I did not keep that up... My own mentor was going through a lot when I was seeing her...but she still always had time for me...I'm just being selfish I think. As a senior, I have a lot of things to worry about and I don't want to worry about a little sister besides I guess.

Often these relationships make mentors take a closer look at themselves. One said, "I'd rather be a mentee than a mentor. I'm not much of a role model. I've done a lot of things I am not proud of." Another described the anxiety of closeness, the complexity of relational responsibility, and the sense of being "pulled" that can come with being a mentor:

It was a lot easier being a mentor before the kid liked me. He's really taken a shine to me. This year we've gotten a lot closer. I see him all the time. He wants to hang out. It used to be if I couldn't make our time together it was no big deal but now it is a problem if I do not follow through. I see how much it means to him.

Endings, either planned or unplanned, bring up a lot of emotions for both mentors and mentees. Working through closure is the focus of mentor advisor meetings and mentoring sessions toward the end of the school year. Whether the bond has been strong or weak, the end of these relationships often brings up uncertainties and losses in the lives of mentors and mentees:

He wants to spend more and more time together, but I am graduating so I don't want to get really close now and then leave. I have a fear of endings. I don't even finish books. I'm terrible with goodbyes.

Another mentor also spoke about the emotional turmoil she faced as she prepared to graduate:

We were so close and I did not want to let her down because I knew I would be graduating the next year and thought it would be better to stop seeing her. I don't like people to leave and I protect myself since my grandfather died...But [my mentee] trusts me so much. I knew it would be hard to stick it out and face some hard things at the end of the year.

Sadly, they never had a chance to face those "hard things." Because of the level of instability and stress in the home lives of mentees, sometimes families leave with no notice. This mentor and mentee never had a chance to say goodbye to each other. As these difficult emotions arise, the mentor advisors play an essential role in supporting mentors, helping them to work through their own issues, in order to build and sustain strong mentoring relationships.

Compassionate and purposeful futures.

Building a meaningful bond with a younger person was also named as a key factor in identity construction and career aspirations. In fact, over the years, we estimate that about 20% of mentors constructed careers in the helping professions as a result of the gratifying experience they had in the project. Mentors and mentees sometimes stay in touch with each other for many years. One mentor said, "It's been about 8 years...and I still keep in contact. We text and talk on Facebook. We have a real connection with each other." Some mentors began to see in themselves the qualities of an effective future teacher, counselor, or social worker. For example, one past mentor is enrolled in a graduate program in social work and continues to be in touch with her former mentee 15 years later. She said,

She is one of the most amazing, resilient people I know and is one of the core inspirations for my career choice...It wasn't until recently I realized that the things I most enjoyed about mentoring—being a confidante, giving advice, being a support, an advocate and a friend—were things I also wanted in my career.

Another mentor reflected on the long-term significance of being a mentor and the way this role influenced identity construction during adolescence and emerging adulthood:

I am still connected to my mentee and will always consider her an incredibly special part of my life. Together we were able to find pieces of ourselves we thought would remain hidden. This program helped me become the most sensitive, empathetic, understanding, and positive version of myself. I will strive to carry these lessons with me wherever I go, through whoever I become.

Perspectives of mentees

On written evaluations, teachers reported that mentees were getting along better with their peers and were completing more classroom work. Parents reported that their children were getting along better with their siblings, liked school more, and seemed more confident. Early in the Teen Mentor Project, we looked at school attendance in fall and spring and we found that, for three consecutive years, absenteeism went down by over 33% for mentees, while absenteeism went up in the overall population of students. We also saw positive trends in self-esteem, with slight increases comparing pre- and post-program self-esteem, using the Hare Self-Esteem Assessment (1975).

Mentees' written responses on evaluations were shorter and more practical than the answers of the mentors reported above. For example, when asked about the mentoring relationship, one mentee answered, "We play a board game and walk around outside and talk about life." But mentees also gave us insights into what they valued and what was difficult for them. In evaluation questionnaires, for example, they frequently suggested more field trips and they expressed how much they enjoyed the group activities.

Someone to talk to.

In answer to the question, *What have you gained or learned?* mentees' responses suggest that mentors help to fill some essential developmental needs in the lives of their mentees:

Having somebody to tell all your problems.

Helped me with my attitude and I feel confident about myself...It helped me to feel out in the open and I don't have to keep it all inside anymore. I can tell my mentor everything good and bad.

My mom moved to [another town] and I don't see her much anymore. I get to have someone to look up to.

One mentee commented that before she began mentoring her plan was to "have kids and drop out of school" but she no longer plans to do that. Another mentee realized that it helped to talk with someone that cares about you and that now he knows that, "You can talk to almost anyone that you can trust." Others named a range of things they learned and ways they perceived themselves to be different. For example, they wrote, "being more honest," "being yourself and respecting yourself," "feeling more trustful of others," "having confidence," and "learning more about myself."

Difficult ties, difficult times.

The most moving answers on mentee questionnaires were when they wrote about the disappointment and sadness they felt when their expectations were not met. In answer to the question, *What is hard about having a mentor?* several mentees commented, "When my mentor doesn't come to see me." One said, "She didn't really come down anymore and it gets me down when she does not. But saying goodbye at the end of the year is the hardest thing of all." Another said, "I love him, he's like a brother [but I] don't see him much."

Many mentees want the bond with their mentors to be exclusive. This is hard to do in a school setting where the mentors are coming in contact with lots of younger students all the time. One said that when her mentor comes to see her in the lunchroom, "Everyone else wants to be her friend too. She hangs out with other classmates when we are supposed to be together."

However, even when mentees described ways that they felt hurt, they also surprisingly said that the project, helped them a lot. Monthly group activities gave mentees a strong sense of group connection. This experience of belonging helped mentees get through the difficult aspects of the mentoring relationship.

Some mentees articulated long-term benefits arising out the mentoring relationship. They often attributed their values, aspirations, and ability to strive to the mentoring project:

I was in the mentor program back when I was in fifth and sixth grade. I am now a sophomore [in college]. It taught me to trust others and to have confidence in myself. It also showed me how much I like to help others. The mentor program...helped me to understand that asking for help is not a weakness but a strength. I still look to [my mentor] for support and advice. The program helps create teamwork and trust...It shows you can come from different situations and still treat each other equally and with respect.

Discussion

Based on our experience, we believe cross-age peer mentoring can be a useful support for struggling students, especially in schools and communities with high rates of poverty. (See Appendix: Guides and Resources for additional practice-based recommendations for optimizing the benefits of peer mentoring.) Since 1998, the Teen Mentor Project has received local, state, and regional recognition for its successful work. The project was developed after the community came together—youth, parents, and educators—to assess strengths and needs and to design place-appropriate interventions to improve opportunity and access to good life outcomes. As a result of their participation, mentors and mentees reported new feelings of participatory belonging in the school and in the community, and a sense of purpose, motivation, and agency. In addition, the project helped to develop community-wide social capital that engaged previously disengaged parents.

At the same time, difficult emotions came up when mentors had to face their own limitations, and when mentees felt disappointed by their mentors. The words of mentors and mentees make it clear that cross-age peer mentoring also has risks, especially when participants are already vulnerable due to social and emotional struggle. As school, home, and job responsibilities become more pressing, sometimes mentors are not consistent. Mentees

are hurt when their mentors do not follow through and this causes anguish to participants on both sides of the mentoring dyad. When these risks are acknowledged, and when preventive steps are taken, we believe that cross-age peer mentoring, when it is well-implemented and well-supported, can create a mentor rich environment that supports individual development and has beneficial results for schools and communities.

The strength of connection and multiple levels of support for mentors and mentees, outlined in the companion article on mentoring in this issue, proved to be key elements in the success of this project as a vehicle for change. Mentors stressed the importance of *listening* and *being* there for their mentees. An essential component of this project is that the school counselor models these qualities, providing mentoring, guidance, and advice to mentees, while also developing a strong relationship with mentees as an intentional result of monthly experiential activities. In a community struggling with very low levels of higher education, internalized social class bias, and high rates of depression and suicide ideation, this project inspires hope and a positive sense of future possibility.

Closing

A participant of this project nicely summarized the multi-level developmental and ecological benefits when cross-age peer mentoring is implemented well: “[This mentor project] is an integral part of empowering the community, promoting good citizenship, and cultivating an environment of care and support for one another.” Those of us who work with youth know first-hand the profound capacity for compassion, generosity, leadership, and enthusiastic engagement that teenagers can show. In our experience, we have found teenagers to be both eager and capable of taking on considerable responsibility and demonstrating good judgment and compassion. In fact, we believe that in any school or community, young people are the most valuable, untapped resource.

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Appendix

Guides and Resources

Building Effective Peer Mentoring Programs: An Introductory Guide

Mentoring Resources Center

<http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/building-effective-peer-mentoring-programs-intro-guide.pdf>

National Mentoring Resource Center

Peer Mentoring Overview

<https://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/what-works-in-mentoring/key-topics.html?layout=edit&id=152>

Peer Mentoring Handbook

<https://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/what-works-in-mentoring/resources-for-mentoring-programs.html?id=70>

Mentoring Immigrant and Refugee Youth: A Toolkit for Program Coordinators

<https://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/what-works-in-mentoring/resources-for-mentoring-programs.html?id=224>

Saving Lives and Inspiring Youth: A Cross-Age Peer Mentoring Program

<http://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/31-featured-grantees/209-saving-lives-inspiring-youth-s-l-i-y-a-cross-age-peer-mentoring-program.html>

Webinar: Peer Mentoring: A Discussion with Experienced Practitioners <https://vimeo.com/125590745>

National Mentoring Partnership: <http://www.mentoring.org/>

Books and Manuals:

Dubois, D. L. & Karcher, M. J. (eds.) (2014). *Handbook of youth mentoring*, 2nd ed.

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Karcher, M. J. (2012). *The cross-age mentoring program (CAMP) for children with adolescent mentors*. San Antonio, TX: The Developmental Press.

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