



Effectiveness of mentorship program among underprivileged children in Hong Kong[☆]



Eddie Chi Wai Ng^{*}, Man Kin Lai, Charles C. Chan

Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 January 2014

Received in revised form 2 September 2014

Accepted 30 September 2014

Available online 8 October 2014

Keywords:

Effectiveness study

Mentorship program

Children from underprivileged background

Mentoring relationship

Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Mentorship program has been widely used to reach out to disadvantaged children. Its impact was not only shown to have a preventive value as in the lowering of anti-social behavior, but also seen in the promotion of cognitive and psychosocial outcomes. Nevertheless, empirical study of the effectiveness of mentorship programs in the Chinese population is still underexplored. A quasi-experimental study, comparing 75 underprivileged children (aged from 7 to 12) participating in one-year community-based mentorship program with a comparison group, demonstrate that the program brings significant impact to the children's academic pursuit (hope in learning English, English competence, academic and English result). While the study appears to suggest that merely participating in the program is not adequate to enhance hope, self-esteem and self-efficacy, quality mentoring relationship is shown to be predictive of these psychosocial outcome and building up extended adult-adolescent relationship between the pairs. The importance of quality mentoring relationship in mentoring research is further supported.

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1. Introduction

Mentorship program has become popular in recent decades and widely been used to reach out to disadvantaged, isolated or troubled children. National or international bodies consider this strategy to be effective to address youth problems, such as drug abuse, violence and poverty (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2002). In recent years, a number of authoritative studies also indicate that mentoring reduce not only serious problems (such as violence and drug use), but also facilitate positive development in youth. For example, Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, and McMaken (2011) randomized controlled trial impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters School-based Mentoring project, involved more than thousands of teenage students in ten US cities. Their study demonstrated that, compared to the comparison group, the mentored youth performed better academically, had more positive perceptions of their own intellectual abilities, and were more likely to report having a "special adult" in their lives (p. 346). DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper's (2002) meta-analysis of 55 community-based mentorship program run in the period of 1970 to 1998 also demonstrate that these programs could promote youth's positive development, including

enhancing children's social competence, academic performance and career development, as well as lessening the risky behaviors of participating youths. Nearly ten years later, DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, and Valentine's (2011) another meta-analysis of 73 evaluations of mentorship programs in the period from 1999 to 2010, further supported the effectiveness of mentoring for positive youth development, across a range of psychosocial, behavioral and academic domains. They argued that mentoring "has the capacity to serve both promotion and prevention aims" (p. 57).

Despite the fruitful findings, empirical study of the effectiveness of mentoring projects is mainly in the US but those in the Chinese context (such as Hong Kong) is still underexplored. While there is a developing interest in mentorship programs in Hong Kong, targeting novice teachers (Lee & Feng, 2007), university student (Lee & Bush, 2003), talented or at risk youth (Chan, 2000; Chan & Ho, 2006), these studies are mainly descriptive in nature and the effectiveness study of mentoring project, using more rigorous design and targeting disadvantaged children, are still rare (see Chan, Lai, Ng, & Lau, 2013 for exception). In addition, given the fact that the effectiveness of the mentorship program was generally supported, the underlying salutary process is far from clear. One of the potential pathways of mentoring influence is the mentoring relationship which facilitate the socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Nevertheless, empirical evidence supporting the links is still limited (Thomson & Zand, 2010). One of the reasons may be due to the lack of consensus of what constitute the quality mentoring relationship. While Nakkula and Harris (2005) proposed closeness and perceived support as the two core dimensions in the quality mentoring

[☆] This study was funded by the Salvation Army Social Services Department, Hong Kong and Macau Command (SA). We gratefully acknowledge the responsible staffs of SA and the five district centres in collecting the data and providing information for this study. We would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their comments on the earlier version.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: eddie.ng@polyu.edu.hk (E.C.W. Ng).

relationship, empirical examination has yet to be done. Thus, studies demonstrating the effectiveness of the mentorship program and further examining the underlying process would be invaluable to understanding how mentorship program work and could work better. This study aims to provide such evidence in a Hong Kong context.

2. The current study

MnM project is a one-year community-based mentorship program targeting 75 children from low-income family background and aged from 7 to 12 in Hong Kong. The program aimed to enhance the academic performance, hope and other positive psychological attributes of a group of disadvantaged children in Hong Kong. The program is characterized by pairing the children with adult mentors in a one-to-one relationship, in addition to 16 sessions of English learning, and some mass activities provided by the operating organization. While the children participated in the 16 sessions of English lessons within the first six months, the company of an adult mentor lasts throughout the whole year. Thus, the English lesson is not only the added-value component of the mentorship program, but also help facilitate the pairs to develop a relationship in the initiation phase, by having shared topics and activities. As learning English is important in Hong Kong students, it is envisioned that, combining these two components, the program can provide stronger support towards the participating children, so as to enhance their psychological strength (such as hope) and academic competence.

With respect to the mentoring component of the program, the mentors were recruited through the collaborating NGOs' community networks and web page. While the mentors were from a diverse background, they were required to take part in individual interviews in order to be accepted by the projects. They are also needed and promised to meet the children in person regularly (at least one time per month). They also needed to attend training and ongoing supervision provided by the organization, before they are matched by the NGO staffs. Our process data analyses (not reported in this study) show that the mentor youth pairs fulfilled the requirement of meeting one time per month as they engaged in a diverse range of activities other than initial English instruction. The primary activities in their contact include having meals or outdoor activities, tutoring, shopping or playing sports game together, to name a few. In addition to meeting in person, it is also discovered that the pairs had much interaction by phone. It is also known from the organization that the mentors were encouraged to follow up with the children regarding their progress in learning English. The mentors were also given financial support (300 HKD/38 USD during the whole program period) to facilitate their communication and meeting purposes. The current study has two objectives. Firstly, it studied the effectiveness of participation in the MnM project on children's psychosocial and educational development, in term of self-esteem, hope towards the future and academic performance. Secondly, the impact of mentoring relationship quality (MRQ) on the psychosocial and educational development, and on the extended relationship with mentors in participating children of disadvantaged backgrounds will be examined.

3. Method

The 75 children were recruited from five service centers of the collaborating organization from five districts locating in 4 out of 5 geographical constituencies in Hong Kong. While the majority of the program participants are through open recruitment, it is noted that some of the participants have already participated in the center activities before the MnM program. In addition to having the participant's group, a comparison group (75 children) was recruited through the network of the collaborating organization (mainly the school network). To be eligible for the MnM program, the children have to receive Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) or full/half grants from student finance schemes (SFS) administered by the Student Financial Assistance Agency. Otherwise, they have household income less than

75% of the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income. It is also noticed that 28 (37%) participants are from single parent background, but the parallel information in the comparison group is lacking. The two groups report no significant difference with respect to gender and age. While the participant groups report more CSSA cases (51%), the comparison groups reported more SFS cases (77%). The 150 children in the participants and comparison group (49.3% male, mean age = 8.84, SD = 1.04) participated in the study in their respective setting at baseline (Sept 2011), and two follow-up surveys (February 2012 and August 2012¹). The second and third surveys were respectively conducted after the English class, and the whole program was completed respectively. While all children participated in the second survey, 11 children (2 from comparison groups) were unable to complete the third survey because of attrition at an earlier stage of the program or that they could not be contacted. Furthermore, while the mentorship program was completed one year after the beginning of the program, it is known (from the organization) that 28 pairs would choose to continue their relationship with regular contact after the completion of the program and last for another half year. Thus, we are provided with additional information on those who are willing to commit to the extended relationship and valuable opportunity to further examine the factors predicting the continued relationship.

4. Measure

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project, we measure the following psychosocial and educational outcomes as the youth's performance after participating in the mentoring project, namely, hope, self-efficacy, self-esteem, hope in learning English, English competence, academic result and English result. All the measures were carefully chosen to reflect values and goals of the MnM projects after consulting the staffs of the collaborating organization. All the measures were assessed in all three surveys. Furthermore, the mentoring quality relationship was assessed in the participant group in the second and third surveys to understand further how the children perceived their relationship with the mentors.

Hope was measured by Children's Hope Scale (Snyder, Hoza, Pelham, Ripoff, Ware, Danovsky, et al., 1997). The scale comprises both the agency and pathway dimensions of hope to achieving a goal. The Chinese version of the scale has been validated (Tang, 2004), and reliability is also satisfactory (Ip, 2008). Example of items are "I think I am doing pretty well" and "When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale is from 0.83 to 0.85 in the present sample across the three waves.

Self-efficacy was measured by the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) in Chinese (Zhang & Schwarzer, 1995) and GSES is a widespread and commonly accepted measurement for self-efficacy in people of different age groups. Example of items is "If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution", and "I can usually handle whatever comes my way." The Cronbach's alpha is from 0.90 to 0.92 in the present sample.

Self-esteem was measured by the widely used Rosenberg's scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which contain ten self-report items. The scale has been validated in the previous studies, but one item in reverse order posed a challenge to the participating youth and lowered the reliability of the scale. Thus, in the following analyses, nine items were used in the calculation of this scale. Example of items are "I am able to do things as good as most other people.", and "I take a positive attitude towards myself." The Cronbach's alpha is from 0.65 to 0.74 in the present sample.

Hope in learning English was measured by a 5-item scale adapted from the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997). (for example, the sentence was reworded so as to make reference to learning English, such as "I think I am doing pretty well in learning English" or "When I have a problem in learning English, I can come up with lots of ways to

¹ Understanding that reaching the children is relatively difficult during summer time, flexibility is given to the NGO for the data collection period (from July to August) depending on their situation.

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