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A typology of school-based mentoring relationship quality: Implications for recruiting and retaining volunteer mentors

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ABSTRACT

A critical component of successful mentoring programs is the quality of relationships. In school-based settings, relationship quality measures tend to rely on single, unidimensional indicators reported by one informant. Using data from a school-based sample of both mentors and mentees enrolled in Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Greater Twin Cities (n = 244), we identified multidimensional profiles of mentoring relationships, factors associated with profiles, and associations between profiles and program-related mentor outcomes. Guided by Positive Youth Development concepts, a latent profile analysis identified three profiles based on multi-informant ratings of closeness, communication, engagement, and compatibility: Tough Matches, Tentative Mentors, and Tight Matches. Profile membership was associated with mentors' attitudes toward youth, match expectations, training received, and perceived program support. Profiles were also distinguished by match length and mentor commitment. Tentative mentors and those in tough matches could benefit from targeted practices to increase mentor capacity to connect and engage with mentees.

1. Introduction

School-based mentoring programs are increasingly being utilized to support the academic and social needs of at-risk or underserved children. Schools provide a natural context for youth development and an ideal setting for facilitation of positive adult-youth relationships. In school-based mentoring programs, volunteers meet one-on-one with children to provide friendship, support, role modeling, and encouragement (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007). In line with a Positive Youth Development framework (PYD; Lerner et al., 2009), school-based mentoring programs may provide an ideal avenue for fostering social connections, developing skills, and promoting school engagement. However, the impact of school-based mentoring programs for youth is mixed. There is some evidence for positive impacts on academic achievement, peer relationships, and reductions in misconduct and truancy (Herrera et al., 2007; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Karcher, 2008; Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010), but other studies have found little to no effects (Bernstein, Dun Rappaport, Olsho, Hunt, & Levin, 2009; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

For the adults who volunteer to be mentors, school-based mentoring is often attractive because of time-limited commitments (i.e., a school year) and low pressure to structure and organize activities with youth in the school setting compared to community-based mentoring programs where mentors schedule one-to-one outings and activities with youth on weekends or evenings (Herrera & Karcher, 2014). With regard to outcomes for mentors themselves, a positive mentoring experience promotes greater mentoring self-efficacy (Faith, Fiala, Cavell, & Hughes, 2011), persistence in the relationship (Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005), and civic action (Weiler et al., 2013). A dissatisfying experience, however, may negatively impact commitment to the relationship (Gettings & Wilson, 2014) as well as one's proclivity to volunteer in the future (Stukas & Tanti, 2005).

Although we are only beginning to understand the mechanisms that produce positive outcomes specifically for both school-based mentees and mentors, the quality of the mentoring relationship is generally

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accepted as a critical ingredient in most youth mentoring programs. This hypothesis is supported theoretically (e.g., Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005) and empirically (e.g., Bayer, Grossman, & Dubois, 2015; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012); yet most research on mentoring relationship quality has focused on community-based mentoring and/or contains methodological limitations which constrain the utility of findings. The methodological limitations are understandable given that the science of youth mentoring is relatively young. New research can build on what has been conducted up to this point. However, school-based mentoring occurs in a unique context, may serve different youth populations and/or attract different types of mentors, and is often more structured than community-based mentoring (Herrera & Karcher, 2014). For instance, Karcher and Hansen (2014) described an important distinction between instrumental and developmental relationship styles in mentoring. An instrumental style characterized by a goal-directed (or skill development) focus initially may shift over time to being more relational in nature. An instrumental style may also be more salient in the school-based mentoring context, while a developmental style distinguished by a relational focus that evolves into a goal-directed, problem solving focus might more typically characterize high quality community-based mentoring relationships. Thus, studies that specifically explore mentoring relationship quality within the school context, while also filling methodological gaps, are warranted.

1.1. Positive youth development and relationship quality in school-based settings

Positive youth development (PYD) provides a theoretical grounding for the current study's focus on mentoring. PYD refers to a deliberate process of providing young people with the relationships, experiences, and opportunities needed to become successful and competent adults. A key building block of PYD is the concept of connections, especially relationships with prosocial adults in relevant contexts such as school and community settings (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Lerner, Napolitano, Boyd, Mueller, & Callina, 2014). Indeed, high quality relationships are implicated as the active ingredient across youth settings (Li & Julian, 2012; Sieving et al., 2017) and within most mentoring-based interventions (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Having healthy relationships with adults has been associated with benefits for youth including academic outcomes, healthy eating behaviors, mental health, social skills, sexual health, and reduced violence (Sieving et al., 2017).

In the context of youth-mentor relationships, most program benefits are derived to the extent that relationships are of high quality and commitment to program expectations for the duration is fulfilled (Herrera et al., 2007; Kanchewa, Yoviene, Schwartz, Herrera, & Rhodes, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2006). Mentoring relationship quality is defined as the characteristics of relationships between adults and youth that are specific to the mentoring experience and thought to directly and substantially influence the mentee's outcomes (Nakkula & Harris, 2014). We contend that mentoring relationship quality may also have potential influences on mentor outcomes. Beyond this definition, the exact conceptualization of the characteristics that constitute a quality relationship varies widely across the mentoring literature.

For instance, many studies characterize quality via relationship closeness and/or match duration (e.g., Bayer et al., 2015), while others consider additional factors such as trust, acceptance, positive communication, and engagement (Nakkula & Harris, 2014). Although rigorous research on mentoring relationship quality is limited, as described below, there have been notable attempts to delineate the types of characteristics considered in theoretical and empirical studies of mentoring. For instance, Nakkula & Harris, 2014 organized three broad types of characteristics: internal match quality (i.e., compatibility, competence, satisfaction, dosage), match structure (i.e., purpose, authorship, and focus), and external match quality (i.e., influences outside the relationship, such as program support or parental engagement). Theory and research has described the types and roles of relationships in community-based mentoring (e.g., Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis, & Wu, 2014), but relatively less is known about relationships formed in school-based mentoring (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Gaining a better understanding of relationship quality in school-based settings can inform training and support efforts.

1.2. Need for multi-informant assessment

One of the biggest limitations of the current literature on school-based mentoring relationships is the reliance on a single reporter. Few youth-mentor studies, in general, have included assessments from both mentors and mentees. In a community-based study where both perspectives were included, concordance ranged from no agreement to moderate agreement (Ferro, Wells, Speechley, Lipman, & DeWit, 2014). In two school-based studies, correlations between reports from both mentors and mentees were relatively small (Cavell, Elledge, Malcolm, Faith, & Hughes, 2009; Cavell & Hughes, 2000). Recent studies of school-based mentoring recommend that future research include measures of both mentee and mentor perceptions (Bayer et al., 2015), as excluding half of the dyad or inappropriately combining scores produces an incomplete representation of the relationship (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009).

Mentors' and mentees' perceptions of the relationship may also predict different outcomes. For instance, Herrera (2004) found that school-based mentors who felt less close to their mentee were less likely to commit to an additional year of meetings. Yet, youth-reported closeness was not associated with whether the relationship would continue. Herrera (2004, p.16) concluded, “Assessing the mentor's feelings toward the match may offer important insights into its strength and longevity that the youth's responses alone cannot provide.” Mentors and mentees perceptions of the relationship may be influenced by differing initial expectations. From a PYD perspective, a low-quality relationship—even on one side of the relationship—would lessen the chances of optimizing positive outcomes for mentees (Lerner et al., 2014). The current study addresses these recommendations by including measures of relationship quality from both mentors and mentees.

1.3. Need for multidimensional assessment

Existing research on school-based mentoring relationships tends to rely on a single construct to measure relationship quality, despite the availability of a variety of subscales and multidimensional measures (see Nakkula & Harris, 2014 for a complete review). For example, one recent study of children in grades 4–9 participating in the school-based Big Brothers Big Sisters program found that emotional closeness with mentors mediated the effect of school-based mentoring on academic outcomes (Bayer et al., 2015). Relationship quality was only assessed by mentee-report on a single-item: How close do you feel to your mentor? This focus on the construct of emotional closeness is insufficient for explaining the nuances of the mentoring relationship in school-based programs, where mentoring occurs within the context of other adult-youth relationships on school property (as opposed to individual dyads engaged in activities out in the community) and tends to be shorter in duration. Although closeness reflects an important dimension of relationship quality, other aspects are important to assess such as communication, engagement, and compatibility (Karcher et al., 2005; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). For instance, a small study of a 5-month school-based mentoring program for at-risk youth during their transition to high school included a variety of relationship quality subscales, finding that different dimensions of relationship quality (e.g., instrumental support and relational satisfaction) were associated with positive changes in school belonging but negative changes in grades (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008).