



Exploring relationships among boys and men: A retrospective, qualitative study of a multi-year community-based group mentoring program



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ABSTRACT

Mentoring has been established as a useful mechanism by which to reduce risk and promote a variety of beneficial outcomes across age groups and settings. However, very little research has explored long-term group mentoring programs for adolescents, and researchers have not established the optimal approach to mentoring relationships among boys and men. This study interviewed a cohort of recent graduates from the Stepping Stones Project, a group mentoring program for boys that began in 6th grade and continued until the end of high school. Several themes emerged from the interviews, including: (a) the SSP encouraged an open, honest style of communication that the youth learned to adapt through observation and experience; (b) the youth and co-leaders developed intimate, trusting relationships; (c) the supportive environment enabled the youth to explore their own identity and develop greater self-knowledge; (d) the transition ceremony provided a venue in which the youths' growing maturity could be seen and recognized by parents; (e) the structure of the SSP enabled the youth to take on increasing responsibility for planning and managing group activities, and (f) the parent group provided an important source of support and community for parents during the adolescent transition. These themes are discussed in terms of current theory and research on mentoring and adolescent development.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring has been established as a useful mechanism by which to reduce risk and promote a variety of beneficial outcomes across age groups and settings (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). For example, recent meta-analyses have found career benefits associated with mentoring in the workplace, both in the private sector (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Underhill, 2006) and among public school teachers (Grant, 2003) and university faculty (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007). Other meta-analyses and reviews have established the benefits of academic or school-based mentoring at elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels (Eby et al., 2008; Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010); for example, a meta-analysis found positive effects of peer mentoring for struggling readers in elementary school (Elbaum, Vaughn, Tejero Hughes, & Watson Moody, 2000), as did a review of mentoring programs for college students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Reviews and meta-analyses of community-based or psychosocial mentoring programs have also found positive behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes for youth of various ages (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011), including domains such as

delinquency prevention (Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, & Bass, 2008) and juvenile reoffending (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007).

The majority of the research on community-based mentoring to date has focused on one-on-one mentoring (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters), with comparatively little research conducted on group mentoring programs, in which one or more mentors work simultaneously with multiple youth (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2013). For example, a recent review found only 34 peer reviewed articles or dissertations on group mentoring (Huizing, 2012), and most of these dealt with workplace mentoring or other programs that involved adults rather than adolescents. Those programs that did involve adolescents were one year or less in length (e.g., in Yeh, Ching, Okubo, & Luthar, 2007, the program lasted one semester). In another review, Kuperminc and Thomason (2013) examined 10 group mentoring programs, but none of these was explicitly designed to span more than one year. Thus, it is clear that research on multi-year group mentoring programs is quite rare, and this gap is particularly noteworthy given that the length of the relationship between the mentor and protégé has been found to contribute to beneficial youth outcomes (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Karcher, 2005). A few examples of research on Boys & Girls Clubs can be found (Hirsch, 2005; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011), but in these informal contexts it is unclear whether group mentoring relationships last more than one year. Finally, there

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is one example of research on a group mentoring program that was designed to span multiple years, but this research concerns an advisory program in an educational context (i.e., secondary school; Van Ryzin, 2010). No research on community-based multi-year group mentoring programs currently exists, even though such programs were among the first to be established on a national level and still retain widespread visibility (e.g., Boy/Girl Scouts).

To address these sorts of gaps between research and practice in mentoring, the National Research Summit on Mentoring developed a National Research Agenda for Youth Mentoring to promote effective evidence-based youth mentoring policy (Rhodes & DuBois, 2004). The National Research Agenda highlighted the need for evaluation of alternate mentoring formats, including group-based mentoring. To meet this need, the current study uses qualitative methods to examine the Stepping Stones Project (SSP), a long-term group mentoring program in Northern California. The SSP was initiated in 2002 and sought to create small groups of 6 to 8 youth along with two co-leaders, who would work together over an extended period of time. The group that comprises the sample for this study was originally planned for the middle school years but was eventually extended until high school graduation.

This sample is also somewhat unique in that it was comprised solely of male youth and co-leaders (although the SSP has recently expanded to include female youth and co-leaders). Thus, this particular study not only provides the opportunity to examine processes and outcomes in a long-term group mentoring program, but can also provide insight into long-term mentoring relationships among boys and men. Although some researchers have emphasized the supposed benefits of shared activities in male mentoring relationships (as compared to the emphasis on closeness and intimacy in female mentoring relationships; Bogat & Liang, 2005; Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, & Sánchez, 2006), others have concluded that close relationships are just as important for boys as for girls (Hirsch, 2005; Spencer, 2007). Since the SSP is designed to encourage the development of close, supportive relationships among youth and co-leaders, this study can explore the degree to which such relationships play an important role for boys in a long-term mentoring program.

1.1. The Stepping Stones Project

The Stepping Stones Project (SSP; Szilagyi, 2013) was founded to address the lack of meaningful traditions associated with the developmental transitions between childhood and adulthood in contemporary communities. The framework for the SSP includes coming-of-age and initiation practices of different cultures, which not only provide formal training for youth in preparation for the “rite of passage” to adulthood but also encourage the development of a community to support the youth in their transition. The primary goals of the SSP are to help youth develop communication and regulatory skills and a stronger, clearer sense of self; from this, the youth can develop and sustain healthy relationships with peers, parents, and other adults, who can serve as their support network during the transition to adulthood.

The SSP consisted of regular monthly or bi-monthly meetings between youth and co-leaders that lasted several hours, during which recreational activities were conceived, planned, and executed; these activities took place both during meetings (e.g., sports, art projects) and outside of meetings (e.g., hiking or camping trips). The regular meetings also served as the context for direct experience in the practice of intentional, meaningful communication. Youth were encouraged to talk openly about the issues and challenges related to school, family, or friends outside the group. Leaders encouraged the youth to verbalize and explore the tensions they felt negotiating the expectations and demands from parents and teachers while attempting to develop mutually supportive relationships with peers. The co-leaders modeled an open approach to this dialogue, sharing challenges from their own lives. Through the regular meetings and shared recreational activities, the co-leaders sought to develop a mutually respectful, caring, and

connected relationship with the youth, in order to provide instrumental and emotional support as the youth faced the trials of navigating the adolescent transition.

Periodically the co-leaders held meetings with parents that did not include the youth, in which the group's activities were discussed in a general fashion and co-leaders provided a review of the youths' progress in the program. Youth also wrote summaries of their experiences to be shared with parents. During these meetings, co-leaders attempted to obtain from parents a fuller picture of the home life and dynamics in the family, in order to put the youths' issues and challenges in context. Parents were also encouraged to share concerns about their youth with one another and develop a network of social support. Finally, co-leaders used the parent meetings to provide insight and coaching on adolescent development to enable parents to support the continued maturation of their youth.

In the fall of 9th grade, the youths' progress in the program (and their matriculation in high school) was recognized with a formal ceremony. This ceremony was a community gathering of the youth, co-leaders, parents, and important others during which the development of the youth was acknowledged and marked with ritual and celebration.

In line with previous exploratory research on group-based mentoring programs (e.g., Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002), a cohort of recent graduates from the Stepping Stones Project and their parents were approached to participate in qualitative interviews.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 11 participants (4 male adolescents and 7 parents comprised of 4 mothers and 3 fathers) were interviewed for this study, which comprised an entire cohort. The boys were approximately 20 years of age during the interviews and all were enrolled in postsecondary education. The mentoring relationships began when the boys were starting middle school (6th grade, or approximately 12 years old) and the program continued until high school graduation (approximately 18 years old). Parents and boys were all European-American.

2.2. Interview protocols

Semistructured interview protocols were developed that asked about participants' experiences during the program, attitudes and behaviors related to the program, and perceptions of the value of the program. These protocols were used primarily as a guide, allowing the interviews to follow the participants' narratives as opportunities arose (Seidman, 1991). The author conducted the interviews in a one-on-one manner by telephone, and they generally lasted about 60 min, although a few lasted as much as 90 min. All interviews were recorded and the audio tape was transcribed. The transcriptions of the audio recordings of all interviews were verified in preparation for data analysis. Interview questions can be obtained from the author.

2.3. Data analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the absence of research on multi-year group mentoring programs, and the open-ended interview format, an inductive approach was taken. Specifically, a process of content analysis was applied (Weber, 1990) in which two individuals with knowledge of the mentoring literature read the written transcripts and independently generated a list of codes or themes to classify participants' responses to the interview questions; these themes were linked to specific words or phrases in the text. The two lists were compared and a final coding scheme was developed for use in coding the transcripts. During coding, the two coders held a series of consensus meetings in order to ensure that they were in agreement regarding which text segments were selected and how they were coded. The

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