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School-based mentoring: A study of volunteer motivations and benefits

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Abstract

While research has been conducted concerning the effects of school-based mentoring on at-risk students, limited work has focused on the volunteer mentors. This study examined the motivations of adult volunteers and the benefits of their participation in a six-month, school-based mentoring program. A total of 31 volunteers completed adapted versions of the Volunteer Functions Inventory and a post-survey as part of a program in which they mentored at-risk elementary school students. Volunteers were more satisfied with their mentoring experience when their perceived benefits matched their initial motivations, though this did not seem to impact their intentions to mentor again in the future. Volunteers' motivations tended toward expressing important values or gaining greater understanding, though some younger volunteers were also motivated to gain career-related experience. Implications for school-based mentoring programs are addressed.

Keywords: Volunteers, mentors, elementary schools, school-based mentoring

Introduction

Children need positive relationships with adults for healthy development. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2008) has noted that constructive relationships, in which a child feels valued, are essential for the development of the child's sense of security, self-esteem, academic performance, and ability to interact with others. Unfortunately

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more children may be receiving inadequate adult support now than in the past due to changes in families and societal norms (Jekielek, Moore, & Hair, 2002; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005).

Mentoring is a way to address problems that can result from decreasing adult availability, support, and guidance in the lives of many children. A mentor can provide a caring and supportive relationship, contributing to a corrective experience for children who may have unsatisfactory relationships with other adults in their lives (Rhodes, 2005). Mentoring programs are meant to facilitate such appropriate, meaningful relationships between children and adults leading to positive child outcomes such as improved social skills and self-esteem (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005; DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002).

Evaluation of and research on mentoring programs has occurred since the 1970's, but more work is needed (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002), particularly where the volunteer mentors are concerned. While some empirical evidence suggests a positive impact of mentoring on mentors (Karcher, 2009; Evans, 2005) there appears to be a need for more investigation of the motivations and perceived benefits for volunteers who participate in school-based mentoring.

Benefits of School-based Mentoring

Researchers have suggested that school-based mentoring is associated with improvements in students' self-esteem, attitudes towards school, and peer and parental relationships (Hancock, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2005). Some research studies have found school-based mentoring to be associated with students' academic and behavioral improvements (see e.g., Caldarella, Adams, Valentine, & Young, 2009; Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2005). Herrera (1999) found that mentors encouraged more positive relationships between the students, their teachers, and school administration. School-based mentoring also appears to be an effective intervention for students who have emotional and behavioral difficulties (see e.g., Caldarella et al., 2009; Glomb, Buckley, Minskoff, & Rogers, 2006; Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Arbreton, & Pepper, 2000).

Limited work has addressed the effects of school-based mentoring on the volunteer mentors, however preliminary findings have been positive. For example, high school students who served as mentors to at-risk peers reported larger gains in school-related connectedness and self-esteem than did a comparison group (Karcher, 2009). Positive effects of mentoring were also found for college students who mentored at-risk children in an elementary school, specifically increases in mentors' knowledge and understanding of child development and appropriate educational practices (Trepanier-Street, 2007). College-age mentors reported they were also learners as they mentored inner-city youth as part of a community-based mentoring program (Kafai, Desai, Peppler, Chiu, & Moya, 2008). Fresko and Wertheim (2006) demonstrated that volunteers may benefit from

participation in mentoring by increasing their sensitivity to at-risk children, improving their coping abilities, and learning how to deal and interact with children. Others have reported that mentoring allows volunteers to expand their social networks, improve their teaching and training skills, and increase their personal satisfaction (Ellis & Granville, 1999). In the context of mentoring new teachers, Gilles and Wilson (2004) reported that mentoring provided several benefits to the mentors including professional development opportunities, increased confidence, and a larger network of cohorts. However, additional research is needed to more fully understand the motivations and benefits reported by volunteers who serve as school-based mentors to at-risk students. Such research could help improve volunteer recruitment and retention, as these are frequently the areas of greatest difficulty in the establishment and maintenance of mentoring programs (Jucovy, 2001).

Motivations of Volunteers

While there is a lack of research on the motivations of school-based mentors, research has investigated volunteering in general. Clary et al. (1998) empirically derived six functions served by volunteering and labeled these as values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. These functions can be both motivations to volunteer and benefits received from volunteering. Individuals volunteer in order to express important *values*, such as humanitarian concern and altruism. *Understanding* addresses the need for individuals to seek learning experiences that will help them better understand themselves and others. The *social* function suggests that volunteering allows an individual to be with one's friends and engage in activities viewed favorably by important others. Individuals motivated by the *career* function volunteer in order to gain career-related experience. Volunteering can be *protective*, as it enables the individual to reduce negative feelings such as anxiety, loneliness, and guilt. Finally, *enhancement* helps the individual to feel useful, to increase self-esteem, or to maintain positive emotions.

Clary and Snyder (1999) found values and understanding to be the strongest motivations of volunteers, and the desire to enhance career to be more important to younger than to older individuals. Clary et al. (1998) also found that volunteers have a tendency to be more satisfied with their experience and have greater intentions of volunteering again in the future when their initial motivations are fulfilled. This matching of motivations to benefits—the matching hypothesis— needs further investigation in the context of school-based mentoring.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate volunteers' motivations and their perceived benefits from participation in a school-based mentoring program. The researchers hypothesized that values and understanding would be rated by the volunteers as their most important motivations, and that the

career motivation would be rated as more important by younger volunteers than by older ones, as found by Clary and Snyder (1999). This study also sought to test the matching hypothesis: that those volunteers who experienced a match between their motivations and perceived benefits would also report higher levels of overall satisfaction with mentoring and stronger intentions to continue to serve as mentors in the future. The findings of this study could provide suggestions to researchers, program directors, and policy-makers to more effectively recruit and retain new mentors and to decrease mentor attrition, thereby promoting potentially longer, more beneficial mentoring relationships.

Method

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a school-based mentoring program implemented as a project of a university-public school partnership. The partnership is a joint venture between a university and local school districts in the Intermountain West of the United States for the purpose of improving public education. Implementation took place in five elementary schools located in a suburban school district, which was part of this partnership. The schools are located in an area experiencing rapid growth, with a significant projected increase in student enrollment for the coming decade.

The primary participants were adult volunteers who were part of the school-based mentoring program. Volunteer mentors were sought from a variety of local organizations including the school district, the partnering university, the parent teacher association, nearby retirement communities and senior volunteer groups. Prospective volunteers were asked to complete an application requesting basic contact and demographic information, along with a brief interest questionnaire to help in matching them with students. Applicants were interviewed, and a background check was conducted for each. Of the 34 volunteers who served as mentors for this project, 31 (91%) participated in this study. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Volunteers were assigned to third through sixth grade students who had been identified as at risk using the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (Walker & Severson, 1992; see Caldarella et al., 2009 for more details). A total of 35 students were mentored by these 31 volunteers, with four volunteers each assisting two students. Students who participated in the mentoring program ranged from 8 to 12 years of age; 54% were male and 46% female. Student ethnicity was comprised of White (85%), Hispanic (12%) and Pacific Islander (3%). A total of 63% of the students received free or reduced price lunch, and 28% were enrolled in special education.

Table 1. *Demographic Information for the Adult Volunteer Mentors*

Item	*Category*	*Number*	*(%)*
Gender	Male	10	32
	Female	21	68
Age	21-30	2	6
	31-40	5	16
	41-50	6	19
	51-60	7	23
	Over 60	8	26
Education	High school	4	14
	Some college	10	36
	Associates	4	14
	Bachelor's	3	11
	Master's	5	18
	Doctorate	2	7
Employment	Business	4	13
	Clergy	1	3
	Education (K-12)	7	23
	Education (postsecondary)	2	6
	Law enforcement	2	6
	Non-employed	3	10
	Retired	8	26
	Student	4	13

Note. n = 31. Age and education were not reported for 3 participants.

Measures

In order to determine the motivations of the volunteers, mentors completed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al., 1998), slightly adapted to fit the context of school-based mentoring (e.g., word *volunteer* changed to *mentor*). The 30-item VFI self-report instrument (see Appendix A) measures the six motivational functions identified by Clary et al., determining the extent to which these motivations are important to each volunteer. The VFI has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure, with factor analysis results from multiple samples suggesting a six-factor solution and Cronbach's alpha ranging from .80 to .89 (Clary et al., 1998). Both the VFI and the post-survey instrument described below use a 7-point Likert scale.

The 14-item post-survey (Clary et al., 1998) measures volunteers' perceived benefits, satisfaction, and intentions (see Appendix B). The first six items assess how closely volunteers' experiences fulfill their original motivations for volunteering, corresponding to the six functions on the VFI. The post-survey also contains three items which measure volunteers' overall level of satisfaction with their volunteer experiences, as well as three items measuring their intentions to continue to volunteer. Because the original post-survey was used to determine the benefits of general volunteering (Clary et al., 1998), the survey was also adapted to fit the context of school-based mentoring. Two items measuring short-term intentions did not easily

transfer to the context of the school-based mentoring program (e.g., "I will serve as a mentor somewhere else in the fall"). These two items were eliminated from further analysis, and only the three items measuring long-term intentions to mentor were used in this study.

Design and Procedures

This study used a survey methodology. All participating volunteers completed the VFI pre-survey at or near the beginning of the mentoring program in November and the post-survey near the end of the school year in May.

Matching of volunteer mentors with students was based on similarity of interests and a goal of assigning students with greater need to mentors with greater experience and ability. Volunteers were initially trained and told that they would be expected to mentor the same student for the school year and longer if possible. Each mentoring visit took place on or near the premises of the student's school. Volunteers and their students participated in a variety of activities during their visits, which included working toward academic and social goals, practicing skills, reading, socializing, and engaging in service projects, sports or other games. Meetings lasted 45-50 minutes, though frequency and time varied based on such factors as class or school activities, and student or mentor absences. There were 442 total mentoring visits, with an average of 12.6 visits for each student, ranging from 6 to 24 visits over six months.

Data Analysis

One-way ANOVA was used to examine which of the six motivations were most important to the volunteers, as well as which of the six benefits were rated the highest. Participating volunteers were grouped into four categories for each of the six functions based on their motivation and benefit scores, as was done by Clary et al. (1998). They were divided at the median based on their VFI scores (high motivations versus low motivations) and post-survey scores (high benefits versus low benefits), grouped as follows: high motivations-high benefits, high motivations-low benefits, low motivations-high benefits, and low motivations-low benefits. Contrast analyses were used to determine whether those volunteers who experienced a match between their motivations and benefits (i.e., high motivations-high benefits group) would be more satisfied with their mentoring experience and have greater intentions of volunteering in the future than the other three groups.

Results

One-way ANOVA results revealed a statistically significant difference among VFI functions regarding volunteers' *motivations* to mentor (see Table 2). Specifically, post-hoc tests showed that volunteer mentors indicated the values function as their most important motivation to mentor, while understanding was the next most important motivation. It was

hypothesized that younger volunteers would be more motivated by the career function than would older volunteers. This hypothesis was confirmed, as volunteers who were 40 years old or younger (M = 3.71, SD = 1.02) had a significantly higher career motivation than volunteers over the age of 40 (M = 1.99, SD = 1.42) [$t(26) = 3.51$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.41$].

Table 2. *Two Separate ANOVA Results Comparing the Six VFI Motivations and the Six Post-survey Benefits Scores*

	VFI		Post-survey	
VFI Functions	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Values	6.39	0.55	6.10	1.08
Understanding	4.61	1.51	4.71	1.40
Social	3.53	1.28	6.29	0.82
Career	2.47	1.44	4.84	1.86
Protective	2.87	1.33	6.06	1.24
Enhancement	3.85	1.69	6.29	0.86
F	36.06*		10.57*	

Note. $n = 31$. $^{*}p < .001$.

One-way ANOVA results from the post-survey also revealed a statistically significant difference among VFI functions regarding the perceived *benefits* volunteers recognized after mentoring (see Table 2). Post-hoc tests showed that volunteers received more benefits related to the functions of values, enhancement, social, and protective than to understanding and career. All post-hoc tests were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Overall, the volunteers in this study were satisfied with their mentoring experience (M = 6.47, SD = 0.74) and expressed intentions of mentoring again in the future (M = 5.63, SD = 1.20). Table 3 displays the means, standard deviations, and contrast results for each of the VFI functions. It was hypothesized that satisfaction and future intentions to mentor would be greater for those volunteers who reported a match between their initial motivations to mentor and the benefits they reported from their mentoring experience. Two sets of planned comparisons for each VFI function were computed to determine if volunteers with high motivation and high benefit scores would report higher satisfaction with the mentoring activities and greater intentions to volunteer in the future than the other three groups.

Table 3. *Contrast Results Comparing the High Motivation-High Benefits Group with the Other Three Groups for Satisfaction with Mentoring Activities and Future Intentions to Volunteer*

VFI Functions and Outcomes	High Motivations				Low Motivations				
	High Benefits		Low Benefits		High Benefits		Low Benefits		Contrast
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t* (27)
Values									
Satisfaction	6.82	0.26	6.33	0.67	5.67	1.27	5.92	0.63	4.09**
Intention	6.04	1.05	6.00	1.73	5.00	0.75	4.25	0.83	2.55*
Understanding									
Satisfaction	6.67	0.45	6.37	0.93	6.80	0.30	6.00	0.99	1.24
Intention	5.58	1.19	5.96	1.32	5.93	1.23	5.00	1.03	0.01
Social									
Satisfaction	6.79	0.27	6.00	0.47	6.47	0.74	5.11	1.17	4.24**
Intention	5.94	1.14	5.50	2.12	5.40	1.24	4.89	1.02	1.48
Career									
Satisfaction	6.58	0.39	5.50	2.12	6.86	0.38	6.14	0.94	1.76
Intention	5.49	1.31	5.17	1.18	6.10	0.94	5.62	1.33	-0.17
Protective									
Satisfaction	6.76	0.29	6.22	0.19	6.74	0.46	5.00	0.98	4.69**
Intention	5.67	1.08	4.89	2.01	6.07	1.28	5.08	0.63	0.82
Enhancement									
Satisfaction	6.67	0.36	6.33	0.00	6.58	0.73	4.50	0.71	3.91**
Intention	5.62	1.05	5.00	2.83	5.81	1.27	5.33	0.94	0.55

Note. $n = 31$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .001$.

The first set of planned comparisons for each VFI function examined the satisfaction of volunteers with their mentoring activities. Participants who had a high motivation score and a subsequently high benefit score for the values, enhancement, social, and protective functions were more satisfied with their volunteer experience than were the other three volunteer groups. The other two functions, understanding and career, were in the hypothesized direction, but did not reach statistical significance. Thus if volunteers felt that their initial motivations were met through the

mentoring service, they tended to be more satisfied with their mentoring experience.

The second set of planned comparisons examined volunteers' intentions to mentor again in the future. In the contrast analyses, the values function was the only one that was statistically significant. This result suggests that future intentions to volunteer did not seem to be highly influenced by whether or not the volunteers' initial motivations were met through their mentoring experience. However, participants who were motivated to mentor in order to express important values, and felt that they had been able to do so, were more likely to mentor again in the future.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate volunteers' motivations and their perceived benefits from participation in a school-based mentoring program. Volunteers in this study tended to be motivated to mentor in order to express important values or gain greater understanding. This finding is consistent with previous research, which also found that values and understanding tend to be the motivations that are rated highest by volunteers (Clary & Snyder, 1999). It is interesting to note that although volunteers in this study rated understanding as a high motivation, they reported understanding as the lowest benefit they received from mentoring. The function of understanding relates to the tendency for individuals to seek learning experiences that help them better understand themselves and others. The need to increase the potential for understanding could be addressed by ensuring that volunteer mentors are offered learning opportunities that can increase their understanding and knowledge, possibly through a training program or in development sessions with other mentors.

The motivation to mentor in order to gain career-related experience appears in this study to be more relevant to younger volunteers, as has been demonstrated in previous research with other volunteers (Clary & Snyder, 1999). This finding could be attributed to the reality that many of the younger volunteers are still progressing in their careers, while the older volunteers tend to be at the end of their professions and have little need for career-related experience.

This study also sought to test the matching hypothesis (Clary et al., 1998): that those volunteers who experienced a match between their motivations and benefits would also report higher levels of overall satisfaction and higher levels of intentions to continue mentoring in the future. The matching hypothesis received some support, as volunteers who rated motivations high and also reported that these motivations had been fulfilled tended to also have higher levels of satisfaction with their mentoring experience.

Several important implications of these findings for those organizing school-based mentoring programs follow. First, such programs should be

designed so that volunteers' motivations are addressed to provide a more satisfying mentoring experience. Second, more individuals may volunteer if their most important motivations are described as possible benefits from the mentoring experience. For example, advertising targeted to college-age students might mention career-related benefits that could result from school-based mentoring. Third, volunteers might be more easily retained if their initial motivations for mentoring were fulfilled. During the initial interview, program coordinators could ask about their volunteers' motivations and discuss with them how they might be able to find fulfillment in these during the course of their mentoring experience. This could increase mentor satisfaction and retention. Finally, understanding the motives of the volunteers may open more meaningful discussions as to which school, student, and activities would be most appropriate for the mentor. For example, a volunteer motivated to mentor based on values might be better suited to an at-risk student in an inner city school, while a mentor motivated by the social function might be best suited to a larger school with several other mentors and frequent mentor meetings.

Although matching volunteer motivations with benefits had an impact on satisfaction, it did not heavily influence the volunteers' intentions to mentor in the future, as most of the volunteers reported that they would mentor again. In fact, 77% of the volunteers in the study participated again the following year. This could be explained by the fact that volunteers in the current study were encouraged to have high levels of commitment to their student and to mentor the same student into the next school year. Thus if the mentoring experience did not fulfill a volunteer's expectations, they may have continued to mentor because of the commitment and/or concern for the student. This phenomenon may not be true for more transient opportunities such as volunteering at a hospital or performing other community service, as was the found by Clary et al. (1998). Additional research could seek to investigate the matching hypothesis in other school-based mentoring programs.

Volunteers experienced several benefits of school-based mentoring, as evidenced by their high post-survey ratings on the enhancement, social, values, and protective functions. That the volunteers found the experience of school-based mentoring to be quite rewarding is consistent with the reports of other researchers (Karcher, 2009; Trepanier-Street, 2007), and may account for their tendency to continue to volunteer even though their specific motivations to mentor may not have been fulfilled. An important implication of these findings is that volunteers may receive unanticipated benefits from mentoring that result in their continued desire to mentor. Becoming aware of these benefits may further increase their motivation to continue to serve as a mentor. Mentoring has been viewed more as a relational partnership and less as a hierarchical structure (Kafai et al., 2008), as the volunteers can also have learning experiences, feel good about them-selves, develop knowledge and skills, and express important values.

Funding agencies may be more motivated to support school-based mentoring if they realize that both the mentors and students are benefiting from the experience (Evans, 2005).

Finally, the impact these findings may have on the students being mentored should be noted. Research in school-based mentoring has primarily focused on improving the well-being of the students being mentored. Although this study addressed the benefits of mentoring for the adult volunteers, it is assumed that a satisfying experience for the volunteers will affect their relationships with the students, yielding a better mentoring experience for all. Recruiting and retaining more volunteers also makes it possible to have longer and more positive mentoring relationships. Research could further investigate the benefits of school-based mentoring for the adult volunteers, specifically the impact on the mentoring relationship and the outcomes for students being mentored.

Limitations

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample was relatively small, as it is often difficult to recruit and track a high volume of school-based mentors. Second, the study was conducted in elementary schools in just one school district in the United States and was limited to a predominately middle class, suburban area. Third, this study followed volunteer mentors for one school year and did not continue to track the experiences and attrition rates of the volunteers into the future. A final limitation was the adaptation of the VFI and post-survey to the context of mentoring, as these surveys were primarily designed for volunteering in general. The results of this study should be considered preliminary pending replication in other school-based mentoring programs.

Conclusions

The results of this study make a contribution to the literature regarding the motivations of volunteers and the benefits received by school-based mentoring. Preliminary support was found for the idea that volunteers tend to be motivated to mentor in order to express important values or gain greater understanding. Second, perhaps not surprisingly, volunteers whose motivations to mentor were fulfilled appear to be more satisfied with their mentoring experience. Third, support was found for the idea that school-based mentoring results in a number of benefits to the volunteer mentors, some of which may be unanticipated by the volunteers prior to their participation in the program. Finally, although this study addressed the benefits of mentoring for the adult volunteers, it is assumed that a satisfying experience for the volunteers will positively affect their relationships with students resulting in better outcomes. It is hoped that the findings and implications of this study may prove useful to mentoring program directors, researchers, and policy-makers in recruiting and retaining volunteers, thereby promoting potentially more beneficial relationships with students.

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Appendix A

Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) Items Adapted to Mentoring

Motivations

Values

3. I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself.

8. I am genuinely concerned about the particular child I am mentoring.

16. I feel compassion toward people in need.

19. I feel it is important to help others.

22. I can do something for a cause that is important to me.

Understanding

12. I can learn more about the cause for which I am working.

14. Mentoring allows me to gain a new perspective on things.

18. Mentoring lets me learn things through direct, hands on experience.

25. I can learn how to deal with a variety of people.

30. I can explore my own strengths.

Social

2. My friends serve as mentors.

4. People I'm close to want me to serve as a mentor.

6. People I know share an interest in community service.

17. Others with whom I am close place a high value on community service.

23. Mentoring is an important activity to the people I know best.

Career

1. Mentoring can help me to get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work.

10. I can make new contacts that might help my business or career.

15. Mentoring allows me to explore different career options.

21. Mentoring will help me to succeed in my chosen profession.

28. Mentoring experience will look good on my resume.

Protective

7. No matter how bad I've been feeling, mentoring helps me to forget about it.

9. By mentoring I feel less lonely.

11. Serving as a mentor relieves me of some of the guilt over being more fortunate than others.

20. Mentoring helps me work through my own personal problems.

24. Mentoring is a good escape from my own troubles.

Enhancement

5. Mentoring makes me feel important.
13. Mentoring increases my self-esteem.
26. Mentoring makes me feel needed.
27. Mentoring makes me feel better about myself.
29. Mentoring is a way to make new friends.

Appendix B

Post-survey Items Adapted to Mentoring

Benefits

Values

1. I was able to express my personal values through my service as a mentor.

Understanding

2. I learned something new about the world by serving as a mentor.

Social

3. The mentoring service I provided was appreciated.

Career

4. I learned some skills that will be useful in my future career by serving as a mentor.

Protective

5. Serving as a mentor allowed me to think about others instead of myself.

Enhancement

6. I gained a sense of accomplishment from my service as a mentor.

Satisfaction

7. On the whole, the mentoring experience was very positive for me.
8. I was personally very satisfied with the responsibilities given to me as a mentor.
9. I don't think I got anything out of the mentoring experience.

Intention

10. I will be a mentor 1 year from now.
11. I will be a mentor 3 years from now.
12. I will be a mentor 5 years from now.

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