

Serving, learning and mentoring through the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program

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Abstract: This study describes the collaborative partnership between a Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, an elementary school and the College of Education at a public university. The partnership utilized a mentoring system consisting of elementary students, college students, elementary teachers and university faculty. Benefits of the various stakeholders are discussed.

Key words: education; mentoring; partnerships; collaboration

1. Introduction

The idea for BBBS (Big Brothers and Big Sisters) was conceived in 1906 by New York City court clerk Ernest Coulter who noticed a trend in the same troubled young boys who kept appearing in court. Concerned for their welfare, Coulter started the Big Brothers organization, which then spread rapidly throughout the country. The Big Sisters organization was later formed and the two officially merged in 1977 to become an international organization, that is now operating in 35 different countries across the world. For over 100 years, BBBS of America has been the leader in one-to-one youth mentoring, developing positive relationships that have a direct impact on the lives of children and youth (Karcher & Herrera, 2007).

BBBS of Northeast Louisiana was founded in 1998. Their core mission is, "To create hopeful futures for children and youth through professionally supported one-to-one mentoring relationships with measurable outcomes". This statement accurately communicates the conviction of the BBBS of Northeast Louisiana and captures the dream of the visionaries, who believed that mentoring can make a difference in the lives of children.

BBBS of Northeast Louisiana has partnered with various schools to work with young students. Jack Hayes Elementary School has participated in the BBBS Program for 4 years. During that time, student participation

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greatly increased from 6 to 47 students and continues to increase, as more mentors become trained and available to participate in the program. BBBS has also partnered with institutions of higher education, such as the University of Louisiana Monroe, to work with their teacher education candidates who serve as mentors (Bigs) to P-12 students (Littles).

This study examined the benefits of various stakeholders in the partnership between the BBBS of Northeast Louisiana, Jack Hayes Elementary School and the ULM (University of Louisiana Monroe). Questions addressed in this study are: (1) How do P-12 students who participate in the BBBS Program benefit? (2) How does BBBS benefit by having a collaborative partnership with the ULM? (3) How do teacher education candidates who participate in the BBBS Program benefit? and finally (4) How do Jack Hayes Elementary School children benefit by participating in the BBBS Program?

2. Literature review

Over the last 10 years, mentoring has seen unprecedented growth. This growth has been particularly noticeable in SBM (school-based mentoring), which is a relatively new form of mentoring, bringing mentors into schools to meet with students. A national poll conducted by MENTOR (2006) estimates that, close to 870,000 adults are mentoring children in schools. This estimate does not include the thousands of high school-aged volunteers currently mentoring in schools. This growth shows that, individuals are working towards finding their purpose and meaning of life.

One of the strengths for SBM is that, staff can supervise mentor-mentee matches at the school. Due to the direct supervision of the matches, other groups of mentors, including high school and college-aged individuals who may prefer or require the additional structure of the school context and on-site supervision, can be involved (Karcher, 2005b). Additionally, because teachers nominate students for the program, SBM can reach children whose parents might not have the resources necessary to seek out mentoring services for them (Herrera, 1999). The school context may also provide mentors with salient opportunities to influence school-related outcomes. For example, the mentor's presence may provide youth an incentive to come to school more often and a disincentive to misbehave or drop out of school; some school-based mentors may even become a voice or advocate for the children at school (Herrera, 1999).

It is surprising that, even with the understanding of how much a mentor may affect a child's life, in the past, teachers and teacher education students were not more involved in taking a proactive approach to the youth of today. Teacher education instructors have long been concerned with doing valiant work in preparing candidates to use effective teaching strategies to teach content and address the needs of diverse learners as well as assessing their learning, but have not as steadfastly involved teacher candidates in offering services to the community of students they may someday teach. A review of current research supports the notion that, children with mentors are less likely to abuse drugs, skip school and engage in violence or other risky behaviors. In addition, students with mentors are more likely to perform well academically due to improved confidence.

3. Methodology

In an effort to bring meaningful service learning programs to the teacher education program at the ULM, the College of Education and Human Development partnered with BBBS of Northeast Louisiana. Teacher education candidates (Bigs) were paired with students (Littles) in P-12 schools that participate with the BBBS. Bigs

mentored Littles for one semester (approximately 4 months). During this time, the Big-Little pairs met weekly for an hour at schools, such as Jack Hayes Elementary School. In these meetings, the Bigs did a variety of activities, such as playing basketball, tutoring, simply talking or helping the Littles with homework.

At the end of the semester, teacher education candidates were surveyed on their perceptions of serving as mentors in the BBBS Program. Additionally, observation data from faculty members who supervised or taught these students during that semester was logged. Outside evaluators conducted annual evaluation in 2009 of the BBBS Program and the data from that evaluation were used to evaluate the effect of the mentoring programs on the "Littles". Additionally, the end of the year data collected by Jack Hayes Elementary School on disciplinary issues provided data regarding the effects of the BBBS mentoring program on the "Littles". Interviews with administrators and staff of the BBBS Program provided qualitative data on the benefits of the partnership between the College of Education and Human Development at the ULM and the BBBS of Northeast Louisiana.

4. Results

4.1 Benefits to Littles

There are great benefits for Littles who participate in the BBBS Program. In a study conducted in 2009 by an outside evaluator for BBBS of Northeast Louisiana, statistics showed that 59% of participants improved in class participation, class preparedness, behavior and attitude, 70% improved in core academic subjects, 84% demonstrated improved self-confidence and 68% improved in their relationships with peers and adults. Not only do Littles display advancement in all of these areas, but they also get the added advantage of having a positive role model in their lives. A Big Brother or Sister is not only a child's mentor, but also a friend on which the children can count regardless of what happens in the children's life. Research shows that nearly 3 in 5 Littles (59%) are being raised by a grandparent or single parent due to a variety of family dynamics, such as incarceration, divorce, death or an absent parent. These children are exposed to greater vulnerability to being involved in high-risk behaviors, because they may not always have someone at home that they can look up to for companionship and unwavering support.

4.2 Benefits to teacher education students & faculty (Bigs)

After only a year of partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters, the college found that participation has influenced the teacher education program on two distinct fronts: one from the perspective of an instructor in the teacher education program, and the other from the perspective of teacher education candidates themselves. Instructors found affirmation that, every teacher education program should have a component of mentoring and service learning, such as that offered by the BBBS or another similar program. In addition, university faculty are firmly convinced that they can better recognize and address dispositions, such as those requiring listening skills and reflective language used by teachers to help students resolve personal conflicts. Finally, the involvement of BBBS with teacher education candidates has allowed faculty to make informed decisions that can help candidates find relevance and congruity in teaching as an art and science.

Any influential perspectives relative to the mentoring experience teacher education candidates have had with BBBS can best be reported by the teacher education candidates themselves. A survey conducted on 39 teacher education candidates revealed that 47.4% of candidates were initially either neutral or disagreed with the idea of participating in the BBBS Program before the semester started. However, after participating in the program, 76.3% agreed they felt positively about participating in the program. Additionally, 71% said they would

recommend the program to others. Importantly, 66% reported that participating in the program will help them as educators. After the required semester, 9 candidates continued serving as mentors.

Through observation, the authors were able to see obvious growth and understanding of differences in students in terms of race, ethnicity, culture and the community in which they live. This evidence was illustrated in class discussions and informal comments that indicated what began as a course requirement quickly became what should be found in the dispositions of one who has chosen the teaching profession. As the semester drew to a close, it was apparent that it was more important that the teacher education candidates made the best of their limited time to positively influence the life of the young person they mentored.

The university was able to count the Bigs' volunteer hours toward grant requirements. This partnership provided the university with an opportunity to implement the model with other local universities and community colleges. University faculty strongly feel that, the academic development of the teacher education candidates and those whom they mentored, as well as the faculty's own instructional experiences, have been enhanced by this partnership and engagement with BBBS of Northeast Louisiana.

4.3 Benefits to the school

Of 661 students, approximately 5% of P-12 student population does not respond to traditional disciplinary methods. These students may be emotionally disturbed or suffer from some other behavior related or environmental disorder. The BBBS program has been especially effective with these particular students. Jack Hayes Elementary School saw a 60% drop in disciplinary issues among the most violent and/or behavior disordered students. This decrease in disciplinary issues was attributed in part, to the students' participation in the BBBS Program. The Bigs were able to teach the Littles correct replacement behaviors through activities they did with each other during their weekly visits to the school. The relationships formed between the Bigs and Littles during these visits were of mutual respect. This respect carried over to the classroom and could be discerned through relationships the students grew with their teachers and classmates. The academic achievement of these students amplified due to increased compliance to classroom rules and to the goals students set for themselves in cooperation with their Bigs. The Littles could not wait to show their Bigs test papers or behavior reports when they showed improvement!

The enthusiasm the Littles had for the BBBS Program was conspicuous. Students eagerly awaited the arrival of their Bigs each week, and the disappointment was evident on students' faces when they were occasionally unable to meet on their designated day. The faculty and staff of Jack Hayes Elementary School look forward to continued participation in the BBBS of America program.

4.4 Benefits to BBBS

The BBBS of Northeast Louisiana organization also benefited greatly from the partnership with the ULM. The organization gained visibility with attendance increases among volunteers as well as cash and in-kind donations through publicity and promotions throughout the community. They also attended the ULM College of Education and Human Development's showcase and convocation, a field trip coordinated by ULM for the Littles, and participated in the college's fundraising gala. A great benefit of the partnership was that BBBS could count on ULM's College of Education and Human Development's professors for any support needed to further the mission of the organization, whether it was a letter of support for BBBS' grant initiatives, or for participation in the annual fundraiser. Perhaps the biggest benefit to the BBBS Program was that, the members were able to increase their capacity to serve more children in one-to-one mentoring relationships as a result of this partnership. Each semester, they are guaranteed mentors through the university's curriculum 386 class.

The mentors in this partnership, who are future teachers, will be great resources for the schools they will eventually work for by being able to share their experience with BBBS. Whether they are encouraging the Big BBBS Program to expand at their schools or introduce the program to schools, they will be helping the organization to further its mission by reaching out to more children in more schools.

5. Conclusion

The partnership created by this mentoring program allows each participant to benefit in multiple ways. The ones who benefit most are the Littles who, because of the partnership between the university, BBBS and the schools, can benefit from mentors who serve as a wonderful resource and support. Teacher education candidates (Bigs) also gain invaluable personal and educational experiences in return for working with Littles. They gain the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those in need while learning about themselves, the lives and the cultures of students like ones they will one day teach. The teacher education program at ULM gained a valuable learning experience for its candidates through this partnership, an experience that might never be taught in a classroom. Jack Hayes Elementary School benefits from having teacher education candidates in their school to help their students in countless positive ways. And lastly, BBBS of Northeast Louisiana benefits from being able to continuously promote strong social and civic commitments within a successful program.

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