

Transformative Leadership Framework: Designing a Peer Mentoring Program for Middle School Students

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Abstract

This review of the literature considers the development of the peer mentoring program by using a transformative leadership framework. Positive relationships are essential to an inclusive, safe learning environment for all students, especially middle school students. Peer mentoring plays a major role in creating this kind of relationship and helps to create a positive school tone and culture. Using transformative leadership as the theoretical framework to develop a peer mentoring program has the potential to exposing students to various meaningful cross-cultural experiences. It provides equitable and socially responsible learning for adolescents by creating schools that value diversity and prepare students to challenge forms of social dominance in the school and in their environment as they grow.

Positive relationships are essential to an inclusive and a safe learning environment for all students. Positive role models are especially important during adolescence, in order to prepare middle school students for life by exposing them to various and meaningful experiences, and helping them to reach their potential. Peer mentoring plays a major role in creating this kind of relationship and helps to create a positive school tone and culture. Strong social structures foster positive relationships among peers, provide a sense of inclusion and acceptance, and create just and equitable schools. The transformative leadership framework characterized by an overriding commitment to social justice, equality, and a democratic society (Theoharis, 2009). It is therefore an ideal theoretical framework for the design of a peer mentoring program for middle school students.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring involves an intense interpersonal exchange between an experienced person (mentor) and a less experienced person (protégé or mentee) for whom the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback for growth and personal development. The peer mentoring process therefore involves two or more individuals working together to develop the abilities of one individual (Shanklin & Brumage, 2011). The mentors guide, teach, and influence their mentees in important ways. Peer mentoring in schools helps students to develop social support networks that will build their self-confidence and enable them to thrive among their peers (Good, Halpin & Halpin, 2000). Bergerson & Petersen (2009) explained that the mentors also nurture the mentees' academic aspirations. Through role modelling, emotional support and positive feedback, mentors influence their mentees' perceptions of identity, self-worth, and the values that they place on schooling.

Peer mentoring builds strong relationships and cultivates a positive sense of belonging in students (Carlisle, 2011). A positive sense of belonging, furthermore, correlates with constructive peer relationships. Goodenow (1993) also found that positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging in school are associated with students' academic expectations for success (as cited in Carlisle, 2011). Peer mentoring helps students to build positive relationships with their peers, which heightens their sense of belonging to their school and contributes to a positive school community.

Peer mentoring offers care and support that challenges the negative views that adolescents often hold of themselves (Bergerson & Petersen, 2009). The mentors provide advice and support when their mentees face challenges in schoolwork, social issues, or generalized

pressure or tension. Having an older youth to talk to or spend time with, and who provides encouragement and friendship, helps adolescents to develop positive attitudes toward school, and to develop strength and self-confidence to resist the pressures of being involved in antisocial behaviours. Peer mentoring provides important extra support that many adolescents need to make it through difficult periods in their lives.

Peer mentoring builds leadership capabilities in both mentors and mentees. The mentors are likely to be thrust into leadership roles (Garringer & MacRae, 2008), thereby providing mentors with active leadership responsibilities. When adolescent mentees contribute to the decisions that affect them, it increases their participation in their own growth and development, which helps them to feel confident, to be self-regulated, and to develop leadership capabilities (Carlisle, 2011). Peer mentoring helps adolescents to feel empowered and enhances the overall self-esteem and confidence that will help them to develop leadership skills.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership is an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society, and honoring the moral duties that organizations owe to their stakeholders (Caldwell et al., 2012). Transformative leadership thus integrates ethical mandates, behavioural assumptions, and standards of excellence that are important in leading effectively. Transformative leadership as a reciprocal process whereby one or more individuals engage with others in a way that leaders and followers raise one another to a higher level of motivation and morality (Shields, 2003). Transformative leadership is therefore value based in a given social context that can bring about changes that are needed in society. Transformative leadership incorporates charisma to create compelling morally-based personal relationships that inspire and empower others in pursuit of a noble purpose (Caldwell, et al., 2012). Transformative leadership creates a personal connection and displays moral principles that help followers to examine their lives, fulfill their potential, and create a better world.

Leadership does not reside in an individual but in the relationship between individuals (Ryan, 2006). The transformative leadership model is characterized by a shared vision in pursuit of a grand ideal to touch hearts, to create personal relationships that bring about the best in others, and to change the world. It is the leadership that inspires and creates connections with others, redirecting their lives in pursuit of a changed society. Transformative leadership resonates when leaders treat individuals with a commitment to their welfare, growth, and wholeness (Caldwell, et al., 2012). Transformative leadership is perceived as authentic and genuine because it possesses the ability to touch hearts, inspire great sacrifice and demonstrate courage to change the world.

To attain excellence in education, there must be effective school leadership present (Brown, 2006). Exemplary leadership that points out the necessity for change and then helps to make that change happen is transformative leadership. A transformative leader provides guidance, direction, and influence for others to bring about fundamental change (Brown, 2006). Transformative leaders commit people to action, convert followers to leaders, and influence people as agents of change. Transformative leadership is characterized by its activist agenda and its overriding commitment to social justice, equality, and a democratic society (Theoharis, 2009). Transformative leaders inspire and transform individual followers to develop a level of concern about the condition of humanity at large (Ncube, 2010). Transformative leadership has the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it (Caldwell, et al., 2012). Choosing to offer supplementary services to those who most need them is an example of transformative leadership. Transformative leaders connect with followers, earn their support, trust, and commitment – and bring out the best in them – which creates sustainable connection and leadership.

Transformative Leadership as a Framework for Peer Mentoring

Transformative leadership is an ideal framework for a peer mentoring program because it exposes students to various meaningful cross-cultural experiences within and outside their schoolwork. It addresses deeper issues related to diversity, such as racism, classism, sexism, multiculturalism, oppression, prejudice, and discriminatory practices among students. Most schools are heterogeneous: students come from different races, social classes, etc. Using the transformative leadership framework for peer mentoring may solve the problems of heterogeneous issues in school by exposing students to cross-cultural experiences that will create a positive school climate. Transformative theory understands diversity in schools, takes into account changing school population, and develops images of inclusive, caring and high-performing schools that prepare students for life in a global knowledge economy (Shields, 2003).

The transformative leadership framework fosters successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning for mentors and mentees by creating schools that value students. Because transformative leadership is committed to moral cause, taking a stand, and teaching social justice, it can equip students (future leaders) to understand and grow in their perceived ability to challenge various forms of social oppression, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and classism. The transformative leadership framework is perceived as authentic and genuine (Brown, 2006), because it focuses on ethics, morality, and change to resolve injustice and inequality (Shields, 2003). As a result, transformative leadership creates more just and equitable schools that peer mentoring programs can build on as a foundation.

The transformative leadership framework inspires followers' commitment to seeking excellence, finding moral and ethical solutions, and making measurable differences in the world (Caldwell, et al., 2012). This framework promotes trust, cohesiveness, security, and empathy so that all learners feel safe to participate freely in the peer mentoring program. Greater exposure to, and involvement in, a transformative framework for peer mentoring programs will deepen students' understanding and acceptance of diverse groups, openness to different ways of thinking, and awareness of social inequalities.

Using the Transformative Leadership Framework to Build a Peer Mentoring Program to Assist Grade 9 Transitions

Transformative leadership provides an ideal framework for peer mentoring to assist grade 9 transitions. Young adolescents benefit from having positive role models to guide and support them. When a transformative leadership framework is used to build a peer mentoring program older students serve as the "mentor" role models for grade 9 students. The mentor provides academic support, social support, sense of belonging, and positive influence. These supports will help the grade 9 students to develop positive attitudes towards school and will expose them to various experiences to fulfill their potential.

Using the transformative leadership framework will assist the "mentee" grade 9 students in identity formation, which is a fundamental component during the transition of adolescent development (Carlisle, 2011). This creation of self-identity is highly influenced by the activities within the school and the relationships that adolescents have with others. The transformative leadership framework will assist mentors to provide direction for mentees in choosing hobbies and interests. These relationships built around shared activities are the key factors in adolescent identity formation. The transformative leadership framework assists students in identity formation by offering inclusion, acceptance, and direction during the transition of adolescent development.

Using the transformative leadership framework to design the peer mentoring program will eradicate forms of bullying that are common in adolescents. Verbal teasing and intimidation are the most common forms of bullying in schools (Carlisle, 2008). When adolescents are exposed

to different experiences, cultures, orientations, and moral teachings, they will shun social dominance or bullying among their peers and at school as a whole. The transformative leadership framework provides equitable and socially responsible learning for adolescents by creating schools that value diversity, in order to prepare adolescents to challenge any forms of bullying and social dominance in the school and later in life. Applying the transformative leadership theoretical framework to a peer mentoring program will expose students to various meaningful cross-cultural experiences and foster successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning for mentors and mentees.

Designing a Peer Mentoring Program Based on a Transformative Leadership Framework

The following steps can be used to develop a peer mentoring program based on the transformative leadership framework.

Step 1: Mentor Selection

Select grade 11-12 mentors from all of the groups that exist in the school: race, ethnicity, social class, student type, special needs, etc. The mentors need to come from many diverse groups of students in the school, because the transformative leadership framework creates just and equitable schools that make all students feel valued, safe, included, and respected.

Step 2: Mentor Training

Train all students participating as mentors prior to partnering them with the mentees. This training will include the following topics:

- different power structures
- social justice and inequalities
- racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.
- moral and ethical conduct
- the scope and limits of their role as mentors
- the skills and attitudes that mentors are expected to perform in their role
- the concept of positive adolescent development
- confidence building as they prepare to start working with their mentees
- program requirements and supports for mentors
- ground rules and expectations for mentors

Step 3: Mentee Selection

Select the grade 9 mentees. Mentor-mentee pairing will be determined by age (such that each mentors is at least two years older than his/her mentee) and by student needs.

Step 4: Mentor-Mentee Meetings

Schedule regular mentor-mentee meetings at weekly or bi-weekly intervals, in order for the pairs to develop a lasting relationship.

Step 5: Activities

Design activities to establish a comfort level for mentors and mentees.

Conclusion

Fostering healthy relationships in any school will build a positive school community wherein students work together in a culture of learning and affirmation. Because adolescence is a time of rapid change and development (Carlisle, 2011), relationships with others are key components of this transitional stage. Peer mentoring provides positive role models to support, guide, and influence adolescents to make it through this period of their lives. The transformative leadership model addresses issues related to diversity, identity formation, social dominance, and bullying. The principles of transformative leadership will help to prepare student mentors and mentees to challenge various forms of social oppression, injustice and inequalities among individual students, in the school, and in society at large. Transformative leadership theory offers an ideal theoretical framework for the design of a peer mentoring program for middle school students.

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About the Author

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