

Mentoring At-risk Middle School Students

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This study examined a mentoring program entitled: LISTEN (Linking Individual Students To Educational Needs). The LISTEN mentoring program was a district-sponsored, school-based program in which at-risk, middle school students were identified by the school system and mentors were recruited specifically to assist these students with school performance or related issues. Archival data from the 2003-04 and 2004-05 academic years were collected to determine the possible effects of the LISTEN mentoring program on at-risk students in grades six through eight. Specifically, the study investigated the relationship of a mentoring program with at-risk students' GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance records. A statistically significant difference was found for GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance rates between those measured pre-intervention and those measured post-intervention.

Often at-risk children need additional support for any chance to achieve success in an academic setting. Even when classroom teachers identify students who are struggling academically or socially, they may be unable to dedicate the time needed to assist those students or find solutions to their problems. Experts in the field tend to agree that mentoring activities, such as those that take place in schools, can be a useful tool in reaching at-risk students (Carter, 2004; Coppock, 2005; Daloz, 2004).

This research was a non-experimental, quantitative study and was completed using an ex post facto design. It was intended to be descriptive in nature. Academic records of students identified as at risk for academic failure were analyzed for academic indicators (grade point average (GPA), attendance, and discipline). This study was designed to determine if partnering at-risk students with caring, supportive adults had a relationship to the students' academic success indicators. The study was limited to a two year period in one school system.

Identifying At-Risk Students

Slavin and Madden (2004) defined at-risk children as having one or more of the following characteristics: retention in grade level, poor attendance, behavioral problems, low socioeconomic status or poverty, violence, low achievement, substance abuse, or teenage pregnancy. These factors were also closely associated with dropping out of school. Frymier and Gansneder (2001) found that students who were labeled at-risk often faced exceptional challenges, such as abuse, poverty, or lack of parental guidance, as young children. Generally, children are considered at risk if they were likely to fail, either in school or in life. In a 1993 case study, Freedman found circumstances, such as negative attitudes toward school, students' perceptions about teachers, and perceptions about school achievement, were associated with student success in school. Students who were failing one or more subjects considered school to be a place of dread and disliked attending. According to Jackson (2005), alienation from school administrators, classmates, and teachers was also

a common characteristic of at-risk youth. Jackson found at-risk adolescents had greater feelings of being marginalized, of powerlessness, and had overall negative attitudes. Cavazos (1999) found that at-risk children characteristically had not received the support needed to be successful in school.

Mentoring as an Intervention Strategy

Research supports the implementation of mentoring programs as potentially successful approaches to meeting the individual needs of at-risk students (Johnson, 2006; Lampley, 2010). Researchers in this area also found that students achieved better grades, established obtainable goals, and enhanced their self-esteem when partnered with caring, supportive adults (Clasen & Clasen, 1997; Flaxman, 1998; 2001; Smink, 2000). Daloz (2004) also found that adult mentors provided at-risk students with a positive and influential person in their lives and also positively impacted academic achievement. According to mentor advocate Riley (1998), effective mentoring programs steered teenagers away from trouble, gave extra encouragement to students, and provided a role model for more positive types of behaviors. Riley also found that students who had mentors, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, experienced an increase in GPAs by an average of .37 points and improved attendance by 5%. The most common characteristic of a mentoring program was a one-on-one relationship between an older adult and a younger person. According to Lund (2002), the purpose of a mentoring relationship was to provide guidance, pass on knowledge, share experience, provide a background for more sound judgment, and establish friendship. The research has consistently shown mentoring to be a beneficial and cost-effective approach to assisting at-risk students (McPartland & Nettles, 1991).

LISTEN Mentoring Program

The mentoring program described in this study was called LISTEN for Linking Individual

Students To Educational Needs. LISTEN was created in 2003 by the lead researcher for middle school students. The program was developed following examination of results from national mentoring programs and other proven approaches to assist identified at-risk youth and was designed to partner an adult with a student to provide additional support with academic success outside the regular classroom setting. Mentors were classroom teachers, school counselors, administrators, custodians, librarians, teaching assistants, retired teachers, and cafeteria employees. The LISTEN mentoring program, although unique, was patterned after other successful programs that served at-risk youth. When the program was initiated, the primary goal was to establish relationships between identified at-risk students and caring adults. By placing emphasis on study habits, interpersonal relationships, problem solving techniques, communication skills, and by encouraging positive behaviors, mentors provided the support and guidance to encourage student success.

Method

For purposes of this study, three measures of academic achievement were analyzed to measure program effectiveness. The students' GPAs reflected their academic progress; the number of absences reflected engagement; and the number of discipline referrals reflected student conduct. Data for each of the three variables were collected at the conclusion of each of the six-week grading period. GPAs, attendance, and student discipline referrals were measured using data from the school district's student information database.

This study began with 57 middle school students; however three students transferred to other school districts during the study. Data from the 54 remaining students were collected. Using quantitative analyses, the GPA, discipline rate, and attendance of 54 students at one Northeast Tennessee middle school that were involved in the LISTEN mentoring program were analyzed and compared using archival data from the 2003-

04 and 2004-05 school years. The following research question was employed as the focus of the investigation: What changes from the 2003-04 year did the 54 LISTEN students who completed the 2004-05 school year demonstrate in their GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance rates for the academic year?

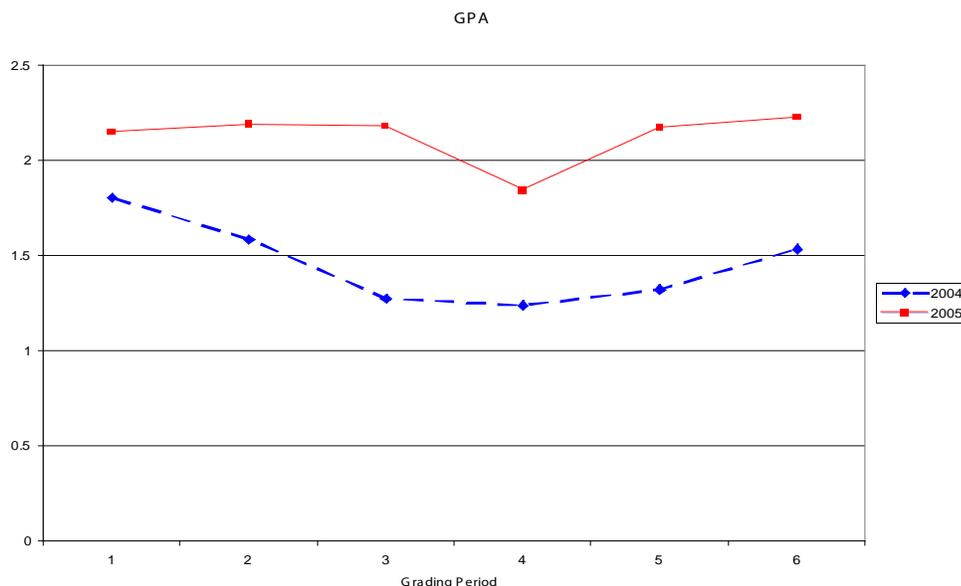
Participants had to meet one or more of the following criteria to be selected for the mentoring program: 1) students who failed one or more school years, 2) obtained ten or more discipline referrals in one school year, or 3) had 10 or more unexcused absences in one year. The students selected for this study demonstrated clearly defined at-risk behaviors. Participants in the study ranged in age from 11 to 15 years. Over 64% (35) of the participants were boys. Approximately 21% of the participants were sixth graders, 42% were seventh graders, and 37% were eighth graders.

Findings

The data were analyzed at the completion of the academic school year to compare the

differences in GPAs between the students in the pre-intervention group (2003-04) and the same students post-implementation (2004-05). To determine whether differences observed were statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was computed. The end-of-year GPAs of the post-LISTEN students (2004-05) were compared to the same student's end-of-year GPAs pre-LISTEN (2003-04). Results of the t-test revealed that the mean GPA for the end-of-year report for 2004-2005 ($M = 2.13$, $SD = .38$) was significantly different than the mean GPAs in 2003-2004 ($M = 1.46$, $SD = .27$), $t(53) = 12.39$, $p < .001$. The students' post intervention GPAs were significantly higher than the same students' GPAs the previous year. There was a strong standardized effect size index ($n^2 = .74$). The 95% confidence interval of the difference between the means was $-.77$ to $-.56$. Fifty-one of the 54 students improved their grades from the 2003-04 school year to the 2004-05 school year. Figure 1 displays the six-week trends in GPAs for the two years of the study.

Figure 1
Grade Point Averages for Pre-Intervention (2004) and Post-Intervention (2005) Groups

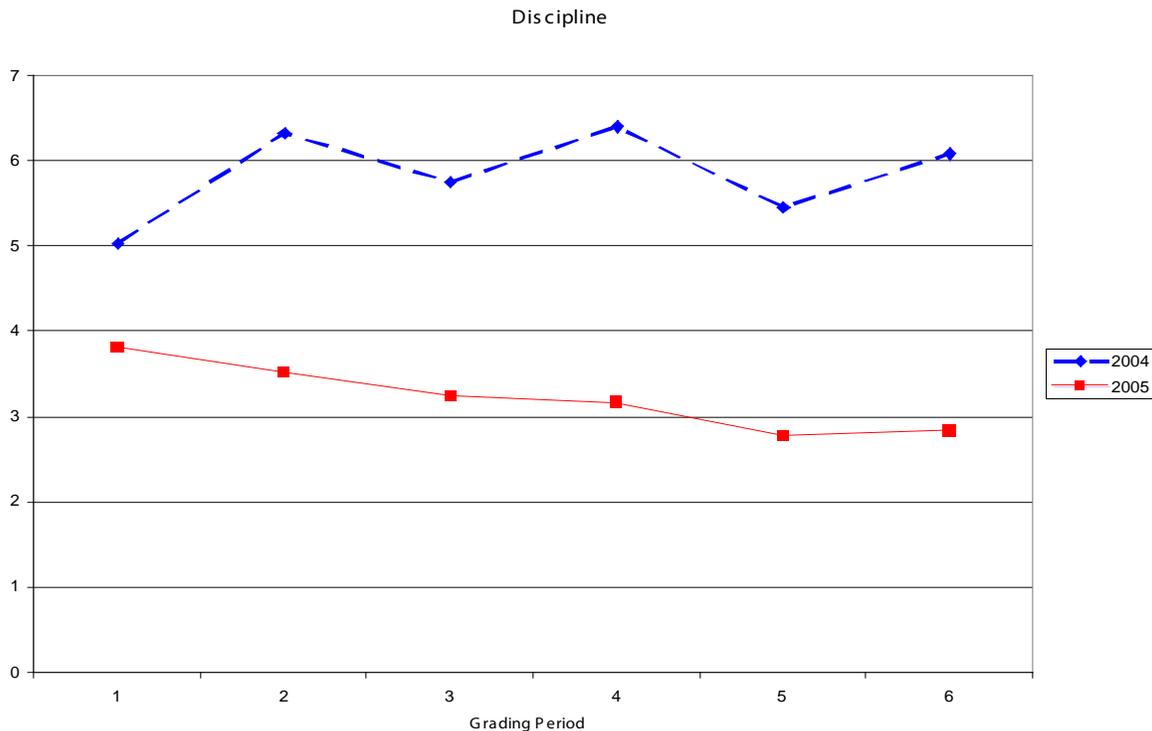


Differences in discipline referrals of the 54 students during the pre-intervention year (2003-04) and the same students during the intervention year (2004-05) were also evaluated. To determine whether differences observed were statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was computed. Results of the t-test using end-of-year data revealed a statistically significant difference between mean discipline referrals for the end-of-year report for 2004-05 ($M = 19.35$, $SD = 11.83$) compared to mean discipline referrals in 2003-04 ($M = 35.09$, $SD = 20.00$), $t(53) = 7.32$, $p < .001$. Discipline referrals for the post-intervention students were significantly lower than pre-intervention. There was a moderate standardized effect size index ($n^2 = .50$). The 95% confidence interval of the difference between the means was 11.43 to 20.05. Most of the participants, 51 of the 54 students, had fewer discipline referrals in the 2004-05 school year compared to the 2003-04 school year. Figure 2 displays the six-week trends

in discipline referrals for the two years of the study.

Differences in attendance rates of the 54 students were analyzed in a similar manner. The participants' attendance in the 2003-04 school year were compared to their attendance from the 2004-05 school year using a paired-samples t-test. Results of the t-test using end-of-year data revealed a statistically significant difference between mean days absent for the end-of-year report for 2004-05 ($M = 27.22$, $SD = 15.22$) compared to the mean days absent in 2003-04 ($M = 37.48$, $SD = 17.89$), $t(53) = 5.60$, $p < .001$. Attendance rates for the post-intervention students were significantly higher than pre-intervention. There was a moderate standardized effect size index ($n^2 = .37$). The 95% confidence interval of the difference between means was 6.59 to 13.93. Fifty-two of the 54 students participating in LISTEN showed improved attendance in the

Figure 2
Discipline Referrals for Pre-Intervention (2004) and Post-Intervention (2005) Groups



2004-05 school year compared to the 2003-04 school year. Figure 3 displays the six-week trends in attendance for the two years of the study.

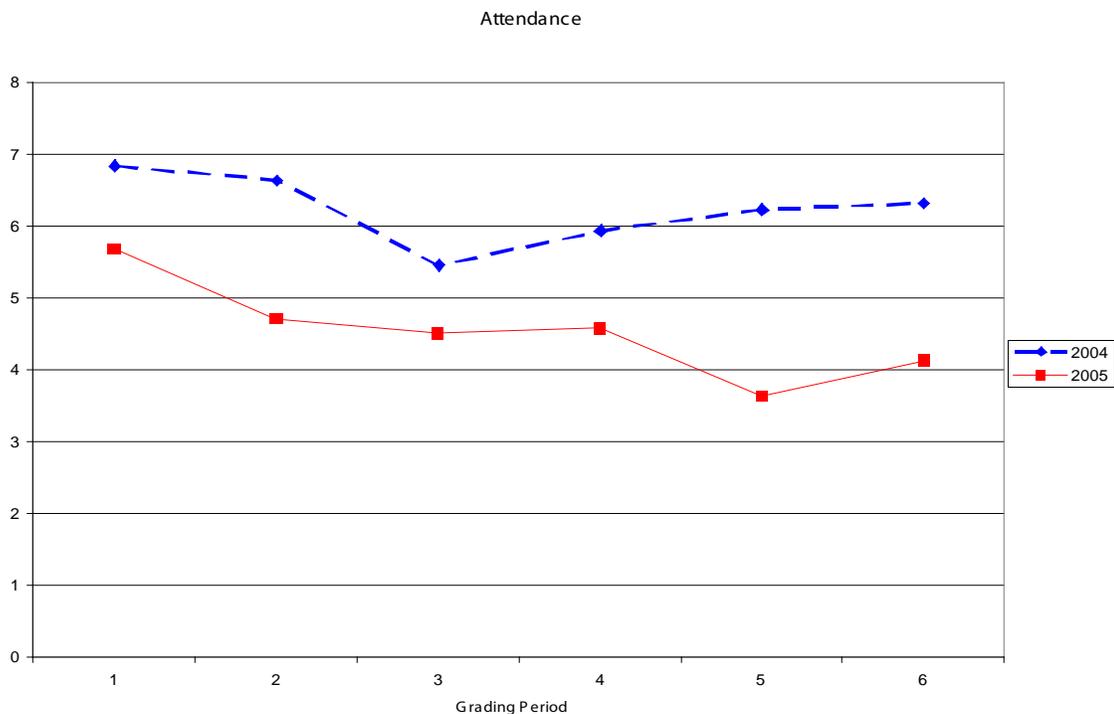
Discussion

A significant improvement was found for all three of the study's criterion variables (GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance) between those measured in the 2003-04 academic year (pre-intervention) and those measured in the 2004-05 academic year (post-intervention) for the students in the LISTEN mentoring program. During the study, 51 of the 54 students involved in the LISTEN mentoring program improved their grades in the 2004-05 school year, 51 of the 54 of the students received fewer discipline referrals in the 2004-05 school year, and 52 of the 54 of the students improved their attendance in the

2004-05 school year. Also, 49 of the 54 LISTEN participants experienced academic achievement gains in all three areas.

The school-based support provided by the LISTEN mentoring program provided at-risk students with a positive role model to whom they could turn for advice and direction. Mentoring, as a method of sharing real-life experiences and knowledge, has been shown to be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk middle school students. The most common characteristic of the mentoring program that was studied was the one-on-one relationship between an adult and a younger person. Based on the findings of this study, it was determined that a mentoring relationship with a caring adult seems to positively impact the academic success of at-risk students.

Figure 3
Days Absent for Pre-Intervention (2004) and Post-Intervention (2005) Groups



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Author's Note

Dr. Johnson is a 2006 graduate of the Ed.D. program at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, TN. She developed the LISTEN mentoring program that was the subject of this study.

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