Research Corner: *Group Mentoring*

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What is group mentoring?

The notion of placing adolescents in groups with one or more caring adults is not new. Youth have long participated in skills-training groups, camps, team sports, outdoor adventure programs, scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, and a myriad of other activities in which one or more adults meet with the youth in small, time-limited groups on a regular basis. It may be the case that some of the youth groups of yesterday are being "repackaged" as the group mentoring programs of today.

A variety of factors make the task of understanding just what group mentoring is - and how it is different from previous group activities - is even more complicated. Group mentoring programs show considerable variation in size, the number of adults and youth who comprise the group, the amount of time that the group spends together, the fluidity of the membership, the structure imposed and the activities in which they engage.

Despite these definitional issues, it is important to begin to take stock in the current group mentoring programs. Along just these lines, Herrera and colleagues at Public/Private Ventures, in collaboration with MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, recently completed a study of mentoring groups. Entitled, Group Mentoring, A Study of Mentoring Groups in Three Programs," it draws on data collected in earlier P/PV studies of mentors[2] and program staff.[3] In addition, it includes interviews with youth and mentors in three different group programs.

Their findings offer an interesting, and somewhat complicated, picture of the potential benefits and limitations of group mentoring.

On the one hand

Group mentoring programs tend to attract volunteers who-by virtue of their jobs, families, age or other circumstances-are less likely to volunteer in community-based programs.

- This includes a greater proportion of volunteers who are older, lower income, female, and African American.
- Thus, rather than competing for the limited pool of individuals who are willing to volunteer for one-to-one relationships, group mentoring appears to be casting its nets into a different pool of volunteers.

Most mentoring programs operate out of schools (the most common site) or other youth-serving organizations. This enables programs to:

- Capitalize on the knowledge, referrals, supervision, and support of the many adults who are already in the setting; and
- Simplify the program staff's task of forming and monitoring relationships.

The results of this study are exploratory-their relatively small, samples were not selected randomly and there were no comparison groups. Thus, findings from this report may not generalize to other group programs. Therefore, the report should not be considered the "final assessment of the value or effects of group mentoring."

Nonetheless, their observations and in-depth interviews revealed some interesting trends:

- Mentees appear to derive benefits not only from the mentor, but from their peers in the group. Peer input may, in fact, be the biggest advantage of group mentoring. To the extent that group mentoring can help with peer relationships, it is likely to have far-reaching effects.
- *Developmental psychologist Willard Hartup4 (1993) observed that "...the best early predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, or school grades or classroom behavior, but rather the adequacy with which children and adolescents get along with their contemporaries. (p. 3).*
- Group mentoring may be particularly helpful to adolescents who are having difficulties with peer relationships. Being in the group may help youth better understand social processes and give them a safe context in which to develop their social skills in relating to peers.
- In a recent study, my colleagues and I found that foster youth with mentors showed improvements in peer relationships over time, whereas matched foster youth in a control group showed decrements in peer relationships.[5]
- Additionally, group mentoring appears to strengthen mentees' ties with other important adults, such as parents and teachers. Again, this finding is quite promising as it implies that group mentoring programs might be tapping into an important avenue of change.
- For example, in a study of mentoring process, my colleagues and I found that mentoring relationships led to increases in the levels of intimacy, communication and trust that adolescents felt toward their parents. These improvements, in turn, led to a range of positive outcomes.[6]

These findings should assuage parents' fears that mentors will usurp their influence. Rather than acting as a substitute for intimacy and communication with parents, mentoring appears to produce positive effects that draw adolescents and their parents closer together.

Taken together, the preliminary findings from the P/PV report suggest that, by improving mentees' peer and parent relationships, group mentoring is a potentially effective strategy.

On the other hand

The P/PV findings clearly indicate that mentor-mentee relationships developing in group settings were not as strong or intense as one might expect from relationships developing in traditional one-on-one settings.

- For example, nearly half (45%) of the youth in community-based, one-to-one mentoring relationships reported feeling "very close" to their mentors, only 21% of the mentees in group-based mentoring reported feeling "Very close" to their mentors. The same pattern held for mentors-only about a quarter of mentors felt very close to their mentees.

  This reduced closeness may relate, in part, to the types of youth and volunteers who get involved.

- They found that group mentoring appears to attract volunteers who take comfort in the greater structure and potentially lower levels of intimacy that one-on-one mentoring often implies.
- Similarly, despite the reduced closeness, nearly 90% of youth said they prefer meeting with their full groups as opposed to meeting with the mentor alone or youth alone. Many youth want opportunities to interact with their peers and some may be uncomfortable meeting individually with an adult.
- This finding is consistent with observations of L.A. Team Mentoring, in which mentees expressed preferences for the group context, as opposed to one-on-one relationships.

Importantly, the P/PV study also found considerable variability in closeness across groups.

- Youth in groups that were heavily focused on academic activities were least likely to feel close to their mentors. This finding is consistent with previous research. That may be due to school-based mentors' tendency to focus on academics rather than the kinds of activities that help to build close bonds.

Another downside of school-based programs is their link to the academic calendar. Many suspend or even terminate service during summer months. This can be problematic, particularly since program effects tend to accrue with time. Similarly, many behavioral problems and difficulties arise during the summer months.

- Robert Aseltine and his colleagues recently found that the benefits of a school-based mentoring program did not persist beyond the duration of the school year.[6]

  The possible implications of this reduced closeness in the mentor-mentee bond must be considered. Isn't a close adult-youth bond what distinguishes mentoring from other types of youth interventions (boys and girls clubs, scouts)? By reducing the intensity of this bond, might we be compromising the defining feature of mentoring - offering something that, although potentially effective, is no longer mentoring, as commonly conceived? Indeed, a growing number of studies have suggested that the longevity and strength of the bond is directly proportional to positive change in youth.[7,9]

- For example, after examining more than 600 pairs, Carla Herrera and her colleagues observed that "at the crux of the mentoring relationship is the bond that forms between the youth and mentor. If a bond does not form, then youth and mentors may disengage from the match before the mentoring relationship lasts long enough to have a positive impact on youth."[2]
- The psychotherapy literature has also established significant links between the quality of therapeutic relationships and positive outcomes for clients. In their recent review of studies that track various psychotherapeutic approaches, Alexandra Bachelor and Adam Horvath argued that a good relationship between two people is "ubiquitous and universal

in all successful helping endeavors."[10]

Yet viewing the reduced mentor-mentee bond in a purely negative light is complicated by the fact that connections with co-mentees may play a crucial role in promoting positive benefits.

- As Herrera et al. conclude, Group mentoring does not simply consist of several distinct adult-youth relationships developing independently in the context of a larger group….Both the adult and peers seem to play crucial interactive roles in bringing about positive youth outcomes.[1]

Implications of findings

Can we assume that these newer forms of mentoring have the same effects as were shown in earlier evaluations of one-to-one mentoring? Does a group context diminish or extend the unique interpersonal processes that characterize one-on-one mentoring? Answering this question requires a fuller understanding of the program's characteristics and goals, the volunteers' qualities and the youths' developmental needs.

Programs

The term "group mentoring" is used to describe such a diverse set of programs that it is nearly impossible to draw any broad generalizations about the approach. Nonetheless, Herrera et al. found that more effective groups were characterized by regular attendance and longer duration.

- In a previous column, I underscored the importance of longevity in individual mentoring. Groups need to meet consistently and long enough for them shape and exert positive influence.
- Longer-standing groups provide adolescents with time to acclimate to a group. Garland, Jones and Kolodny (1973) have proposed a five-stage model of adolescent therapy group process. Very likely, group mentoring follows similar stages.[11]

Mentors

The literature on adolescent group therapy[12] discusses several important leadership qualities, including:

- Creating a positive climate;
- Actively listening;
- Making eye contact;
- Providing support;
- Avoiding "should" statements; and
- Taking risks (i.e., identifying own feelings of vulnerability).

Additionally, Herrera et al., found that the more successful groups were characterized by leaders who were sensitive to youth's activity preferences as opposed to being overly structured and inflexible or overly focused on academics.

Allowing adolescents to have input into the activities, and creating a warm, less-structured context, does not, however, imply that the mentor should take a laissez-faire approach toward leading the group process. In fact, there is a strong consensus that adolescents do best in groups that have an active, directive leader.

Dies[12] has discussed the importance of taking the time to help youth and adults better understand what is expected of them (i.e., regular attendance, confidentiality, mutual respect).

Lewis Richmond, a psychiatrist who led adolescent therapy groups for thirty-five years wrote a wonderful article in the Journal of Child and Adolescent Group Therapy, in which he reflected on what he felt worked (and didn't work) when leading groups[14]. He suggested that group leaders need to enjoy and have sufficient energy to deal with adolescents, and be:

- Knowledgeable about contemporary adolescent culture "from tooth paste preferences to rap groups";
- Able to relate and communicate clearly with teens;
- Willing to use disclosure appropriately with honesty and openness;
- Relatively comfortable with one's self;
- Willing to learn from youth;
- Action-oriented and comfortable in being directive;
- Friendly, but not act like a peer;
- Able to provide factual information;
- An appropriate role model - particularly in areas of stability and dependability;
- Careful when using humor and sarcasm so as not to hurt the adoelscents' feelings; and
- Sensitive to the dynamics of the group.

  Richmond has argued that the leader of adolescent groups has many roles, including being a:

- Coach to give advice and constructive criticism;
- Traffic cop to direct the flow of interactions;
- Interpreter to clarify communications between group members;
- Director to develop the group into a functional unit;
- Lion tamer to maintain control;
- Chess master to anticipate plan future moves in the group; and
- Gardener to cultivate growth.

Youth

The developmental needs and circumstances of youth vary widely. In light of the increasingly diversified range of mentoring programs, a major challenge will be to make appropriate, individualized referrals. Certain youth might only be responsive to highly structured, one-on-one mentoring relationships or even psychotherapy. For youth who are struggling with peer relationships, however, a self-contained, supervised peer group might be just the ticket. Establishing friendships is a major developmental task of adolescence. Group settings provide an unparalleled opportunity for adults to observe their mentees interacting in peer groups.

Group therapist researchers' criteria for selecting youth for group therapy might have some relevance.[15] They tend to recommend groups for children and adolescents who:

- Have behavioral problems that are focused primarily around the peer group;
- Are not responsive to individual one-on-one approaches;
- Relate negatively to adult authority figures;
- Are in need of feedback about their group behavior; and
- Have difficulties with social skills.

On the other hand, adolescents with more severe behavioral or psychological disorders often do poorly in group psychotherapy. As group therapy expert, Dies observed, requiring troubled adolescents to "put their own issues aside and give focus and feedback to peers may be begging for failure."

The bottom line

The P/PV study and the group therapy literature have provided important insights into group mentoring. Nevertheless, additional, program-specific evaluations are needed.

Even in the absence of more extensive evaluation data, it is probably safe to say that positive outcomes in group mentoring are partially determined by:

- Program quality: Programs that support each group, from its initial formation (including mentor recruitment and training, appropriate youth referrals) to ongoing supervision.
- Program approach: Programs that are not overly focused on academics and that provide youth with less-structured opportunities to experience the group process.
- Mentor characteristics: Mentors who are active, direct and engaging.
- Youth characteristics: Youth who are struggling with social confidence and interpersonal relationships.

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Endnotes

1. The programs included, YouthFriends, which provides technical assistance to school districts setting up school-based mentoring programs, TEAMSWORKS Program, which organizes teams of mentors to meet with groups of middle-school students, and the Group Mentoring of the Be-A-Friend Big Brothers Big Sisters Program of Erie County, which assigns paid staff as mentors to small groups of youth.

2. Indeed, similar stages have been noted by leaders of L.A. Team mentoring.

- Pre-Affiliation -The adult leader tends to be at the center of attention while the adolescents "test the waters" and wonder how they fit in.

- Power and control-The group members struggle to gain status within the group, establishing an informal "pecking order," and testing where the adult leader and their peers will set limits.
- Differentiation-The groups coheres; members take risks - showing some vulnerability; feedback is provided among members.
- Termination-positive change is noted and consolidated; member discuss any feelings of loss.
- Program staff can draw on their knowledge of the phases of relationships to interpret and effectively respond to common patterns of group behavior

3. This echoes findings from studies of individual mentoring. For example, my colleagues and I found that youth who characterized their relationships as providing moderate (as opposed to high) levels of activity and structure derived the largest number of benefits when compared with the control group. [12] These and other findings underscore the importance of involvement in enjoyable activities. As Sipe concluded, "Not only is having fun a key part of relationship-building, but it provides youth with opportunities that are often not otherwise available to them."[13]

4. Herrera et al.,(1999) for example, found that school-based relationships tend to be less intensive than their community-based counterparts. Along similar lines, in a meta analysis of 55 mentoring program evaluations, DuBois and colleagues[7] found that programs in community and other settings outside school (e.g., the workplace) yielded more favorable outcomes than those in school settings.