

**Mentoring At-risk Youth:
Improving Academic Achievement in Middle School Students**

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Abstract

Research supports the implementation of mentoring programs as potentially successful approaches to meeting the needs of at-risk students. 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. Mentors, in this study, were classroom teachers, school counselors, administrators, custodians, librarians, teaching assistants, retired teachers, and cafeteria employees. Archival data from the 2003–04 and 2004–05 academic years were analyzed. A statistically significant difference was found for all three of the study's criterion variables (GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance records) between those measured in the 2003–04 academic year (pre-intervention) and those measured in the 2004–05 academic year (post-intervention). Forty-nine of the fifty-four LISTEN participants experienced academic achievement gains in all three areas of the study.

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Children at risk for academic failure frequently lack support and encouragement from parents or guardians and in some cases live in homes where basic needs may not be met. Also, it is not unusual for a classroom teacher to have several students who have been labeled “at risk.” 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 are often 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).

At-risk children usually have one or more of the following characteristics: retention in grade level, poor attendance, behavioral problems, low socioeconomic status or poverty, low achievement, substance abuse, or teenage pregnancy (Slavin & Madden, 2004). These factors are also closely associated with dropping out of school. Students who are labeled at-risk often faced exceptional challenges, such as abuse, poverty, or lack of parental guidance, as young children (Frymier & Gansneder, 2001). Negative attitudes toward school,

teachers, and school achievement, are often associated with academic failure (Freedman, 1993). Students who are failing one or more subjects often consider school to be a place of dread and disliked attending. Alienation from school administrators, classmates, and teachers is also a common characteristic of at-risk youth (Jackson, 2005). Generally, children are considered at risk if they are likely to fail, either in school or in life.

Mentoring has been shown to help students achieved better grades, established obtainable goals, and enhanced their self-esteem when partnered with caring, supportive adults (Clasen & Clasen, 1997; Flaxman, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Smink, 2000). Adult mentors can provide at-risk students with a positive and influential person in their lives and may positively impact academic achievement (Daloz, 2004). Effective mentoring programs steer teenagers away from trouble, give extra encouragement to students, and provide a role model for more positive types of behaviors (Riley, 1998). It has also been shown that students who have mentors, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, experience an increase in GPAs and improved attendance. The most common characteristic of a mentoring program is a one-on-one relationship between an older adult and a younger person. The purpose of a mentoring relationship is to provide guidance, pass on knowledge, share experience, provide a background for more sound judgment, and establish friendship (Lund, 2002). Research indicates that a positive, caring adult could offer an at-risk student substantial emotional and instructional support that could

supplement the needs not met by a student's family or regular school program (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 co-researcher for her middle school students. The program was designed to partner an adult with a student to provide additional support outside the regular classroom setting. Approximately 35 mentors were recruited for the LISTEN program from district classroom teachers, school counselors, administrators, custodians, librarians, teaching assistants, retired teachers, and cafeteria employees. Training sessions were conducted by the LISTEN program director. Mentors met with students an average of twice each week during the school year. The LISTEN mentoring program 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 an 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

Participants

This study began with 57 middle school students; however three students transferred to other school districts during the study. Data were collected from the 54 remaining students at one Northeast Tennessee middle school that participated in the LISTEN mentoring program. Students' GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance rates were analyzed and compared using archival data from the 2003–04 and 2004–05 school years. Students had to meet one or more of the following criteria to be selected for the mentoring program: 1) failed one or more school years, 2) obtained 10 or more discipline referrals in one school year, or 3) had 10 or more unexcused absences in one year. 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.

Design and Procedure

This research was completed using an ex post facto design and is descriptive in nature. Academic records of students identified as at risk for academic failure were analyzed for students' GPAs, attendance rates, and discipline referrals. This study was designed to determine if partnering the

participating at-risk students with caring, supportive adults was associated with the three academic indicators. This study was limited to a two-year period in one school system.

Data Collection

For purposes of this study, three measures of academic achievement were analyzed. 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 and collated at the end of each school year. GPAs, attendance rates, and discipline referrals were collected using data from the school district's student information database.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed, using paired sample t-tests, to compare the differences in each of the three variables (GPAs, discipline referrals, and attendance rates) between the pre-intervention scores (2003–04) and the same students' post-implementation scores (2004–05). In this situation, each subject acted as his or her own control (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003).

Results

GPA

The end-of-year GPAs of the post-LISTEN students were compared to the same student's end-of-year GPAs pre-LISTEN. The mean GPA for post-intervention students was significantly different than the mean GPAs for pre-intervention students, $t(53) = 12.39, p < .001$. The students' post intervention GPAs were significantly higher than the same students' GPAs the previous year. There was a strong standardized effect size index ($\eta^2 = .74$). Fifty-one of the fifty-four students improved their grades from the 2003–04 school year to the 2004–05 school year.

Discipline

Post-intervention mean discipline referrals were compared to mean discipline referrals for the pre-intervention year, $t(53) = 7.32, p < .001$. Discipline referrals for the post-intervention period were significantly lower than pre-intervention. There was a moderate standardized effect size index ($\eta^2 = .50$). 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.

Attendance

The participants' pre-intervention attendance rates were compared to their attendance from the post-intervention year. The analysis revealed a statistically

significant difference between mean days absent for pre-intervention students compared to the mean days absent for post-intervention students, $t(53) = 5.60$, $p < .001$. Attendance rates for the post-intervention period were significantly higher than pre-intervention. There was a moderate standardized effect size index ($\eta^2 = .37$). Fifty-two of the 54 students participating in LISTEN showed improved attendance in the 2004–05 school year compared to the 2003–04 school year. Means and standard deviations for all three academic variables are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Academic Variables

	N	Pre Intervention M (SD)	Post Intervention M (SD)
GPA	54	1.46 (0.27)	2.13 (0.38)
Discipline	54	35.09 (20.00)	19.35 (11.83)
Attendance	54	37.48 (17.89)	27.22 (15.22)

Summary of Findings

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 improvement in all three areas.

Discussion

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 LISTEN mentoring program was the one-on-one relationship between an adult and a younger person. The purpose of this type of relationship is to provide guidance, pass on knowledge, share experience, provide a background for more sound judgment, and establish friendship (Lund, 2002). Based on the findings of this study, it was determined that a mentoring relationship with a caring adult, specifically the LISTEN mentoring program, seems to positively impact the academic success of at-risk students, at least in the short term.

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