COMMON GROUND: USING STUDENT CHOICE TO ENHANCE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS IN YEAR 11 AND 12 BOYS

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Abstract

Mentoring is a process that many schools have in place for their students. This action research project was undertaken to ascertain the extent to which implementing a student agency component would improve the quality of the mentoring relationship. Seventeen participants took part in the study who were identified as good candidates owing to them needing guidance in either academic commitments or social interactions. The study was designed to afford boys aged 15-17 years-old more choice as to who they wanted to be mentored by, based on criteria they set for an "ideal" mentor. Mentors were then assigned to the boys, based on their feedback. The analysis of the results showed that the boys felt more connected to their mentor, had more in common with them, and felt more comfortable during sessions, owing to the fact they were afforded more autonomy, responsibility and control over the support they received.

Introduction

A mentor is not someone who walks ahead of us to show us how they did it. A mentor walks alongside us to show us what we can do. (Sinek, 2018)

Research shows that mentorship is a powerful process for young people that can have a transformative effect on their perception of self, achieving goals, and wider context of their development (Liang et al., 2013). Adding a student agency element to mentorship affords boys the opportunity to be empowered to make a choice as to what areas in their journey they want to be mentored in and by whom. The primary goal of mentoring programs is to pair a nurturing, capable, non-parental adult (or peer) with a youth, in this instance, a boy who typically required intervention to overcome a particular barrier (or set of barriers) that precluded them from reaching their potential. Driving the intervention is the core assumption that through the development of caring, close relationships with their mentee, a mentor can foster protective and goal driven, strength-based factors that can place a boy on a positive developmental trajectory (Zand et al., 2009).

Through the undertaking of this action research, I hoped to change the perception of mentoring for boys away from something that is "done to them" to become something that is "done with" and guided by them. In turn, the trust garnered from a process that elicits a boys' voice, choice and agency was central to

this process and referred to constantly throughout. Mutual trust and a sense that one is understood, liked, and respected are essential conditions for establishing the mentor–mentee relationship (Zak, 2008). In essence, it was the measurement of these very qualities, and the extent to which they can be fostered, that led to me to embark upon this action research project.

Action research was one of the most appropriate methodologies for answering my key question as it afforded an opportunity for a depth of understanding and discourse, within our context, to be established with a group of boys. As this area was something I was wanting the boys to construct (and hopefully lead to a programme in future years) an action research approach allowed for a cyclical process of feedback and feed forward that informed all steps and areas of this process (Stringer, 2010).

My belief was that this action research project would have an appeal to boys, as it was one in which they would be in control of their own mentorship. This notion aligned with research suggest the importance of relational learning and the power of creating programmes and "safe spaces" that afford boys the opportunity to process and to show emotion (Reichert et al., 2012).

Background

Westlake Boys High School is a state secondary school for boys located in Forrest Hill, Auckland, New Zealand. The school opened in 1962, when Westlake High School split into Westlake Girls High School on the existing site and Westlake Boys High School on a new site. Our school has a roll of 2,388 boys and aims to offer an outstanding learning environment for teenage boys on the North Shore of Auckland. We believe that by providing a range of opportunities for our students, inside and outside the classroom, we will help them discover their passion and fulfil their potential.

Research Question

How does giving Year 11-12 boys more autonomy in choosing their mentor deepen their connection and appreciation to the mentoring process?

Literature Review

The purpose of this review of the current literature is to give an overview of the current trends and themes that inform perspectives and understanding of the role of student agency in the mentoring process. Familiarity with the key concepts that underpin previous research will be essential to ensuring that this action research is aligned to existing expertise in the topic area(s).

A consistent theme when looking at existing literature is that, whilst research into the framework/composition of many mentoring programmes exist, reviews of the effectiveness of those programmes is somewhat lacking. This action research aims to address a potential gap in the current research and will hopefully provide a narrative from boys themselves that gives a voice to what they feel

is most important and effective within a mentor programme. Primarily, this is due to the diverse nature of the process and outcomes that a mentorship relationship can be judged upon. Nonetheless, a recurring theme that is a consistent predictor of success is that of "match strength." Match strength is the extent to which a mentor-mentee relationship can be validated and, in turn, seen as relationally successful. The higher the level of match strength, the greater likelihood that a mentor relationship will be useful, rewarding and effective (Rhodes et al., 2016).

The consideration given to match strength is an important one for this action research as its connotations and validity can have wide reaching and positive effects. Previous studies have shown that the effectiveness of outcomes became progressively stronger in direct correlation to the period of time that a mentoring relationship lasts for (Raposa et al., 2019). A meta-analysis conducted in 2013, showed that the largest benefits observed are evident for youth in relationships that lasted 1 year or longer (Eby et al., 2013). By contrast, youth in relationships that terminated in fewer than 3 months showed declines in the functional effectiveness of the mentoring process (Grossman et al., 2012).

The pattern of match strength relative to the length of the mentoring relationship is essential to consider for this action research, as it helped account for the potential complexities of the youth mentoring process. As alluded to earlier, mentoring is thought to rest on close interpersonal connections and, in some cases, to influence youth through changes in their approach to other relationships. For example, by providing care and support, mentors can challenge negative views that youth may hold of themselves and demonstrate that positive relationships with adults are possible. Positive social-emotional experiences with mentors may be generalizable, enabling youth to interact with others more effectively. In support of this prediction, enduring mentoring relationships have been linked to significant improvements in youths' perceptions of their relationships with parents, peers, and other adults (Farruggia et al., 2011). As previous research has demonstrated, boys are often reluctant to talk about their feelings and emotions to others (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019). The reasons for this are as wide as they are varied, however, one key concept for engaging in changing this is the need for young people to feel a sense of value and belonging in the institution, situation or environment within which they find themselves (Thaler, 2015).

This project allowed for a boy to have a voice in a safe setting which then lead to them experiencing a mentorship relationship that was designed by them and for them, ensuring they had the agency to establish a mentor that suited their needs and aspirations. In order for this to occur, the action research needed to be cognisant of the importance of examining mentoring relationships from both the mentor and mentee perspectives, as a single perspective might not have presented a full picture of the relationship. This may be a limitation of this action research as the design did not afford a dual perspective. To clarify, the data generated were only be from the boys, as per the brief of this action research. However, as highlighted in previous research, it would be remiss to not consider the nuance of this. Relationships are

more than the sum of two different people's perspectives. They are a separate entity that requires a different level of measurement and a different lens for analysis. If we are to truly help mentors and mentees to build strong mentoring relationships, the evidence is consistent in stating that we must conduct research that helps identify the uniquely relational factors that contribute to relationship sustainability and success. Understanding how mentors' and mentees' views together influence relational success lends important implications for both research and practice (Varga & Deutsch, 2016).

Choice architecture (the deliberate design of different ways in which choices can be presented and the impact of that presentation on decision-making) and the behavioural economics term, "nudging" were central to the action research process in this area. The research question could not be answered by trying to track or to implement a boy's anticipated choices. Instead, the research question was answered through the design of the action in that it aimed to allow participants the opportunity to make a self- conscious choice to improve their situation. For the purpose of clarity, a "nudge" was deemed as any aspect of the choice architecture that alters a person's perception or behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or changing their incentives i.e. a nudge can be viewed as opposite to a mandate. For example, in a broader context, putting healthy fruits and vegetables at eye level in a supermarket is a "nudge," banning junk food in the supermarket is not (Hansen and Jespersen, 2013).

Methodology and Design

The participants in this action research were Year 11 or 12 boys involved in the New Zealand NCEA Level 1 or Level 2 qualification. Boys were identified by our Academic Dean and Senior Leadership Team as being candidates that would benefit from being involved. Selection criteria included, but were not limited to, academic performance, effort in class, pastoral care and familial circumstances.

Once a boy had been identified, I discussed the aims of the project with them and why we felt they would be able to make a positive change through their involvement. We arranged for 17 participants to embark on this action research. Once consent and agreement had been sought, chosen boys participated in an exercise whereby they provide qualitative data about their perceptions of mentoring, the definition of a mentor, and what they felt the outcomes of quality mentoring would be. The data were used in comparison to the completion of a reflective piece of work that occurred after the students had completed their mentoring sessions. This was completed in the form of a pre-survey and repeated at the culmination of the process, to afford analysis and comparison between the former and latter responses. Prior to starting the mentoring process, participants created a "job description" and "person specification" as to what they were looking for in a mentor and for what they hoped to get out of the process. These data were used when assigning mentors to our boys and formed part of a "matching' inventory."

The mentors used were an already established group of non-teaching staff who volunteered to be a part of our wider mentoring programme. All received the requisite training and knew that the assigning of a boy to them was based on a "best fit" model guided by the data created from the boys themselves.

The pre-session work was completed at the beginning of September and the mentoring phase began in the middle of September. Boys then completed their mentoring sessions throughout October, November and December. This ensured that the comparative data were gathered by the end of 2019.The mentors met with their boys at least once per month (sometimes twice) and this allowed for a minimum of four sessions, but in most cases there were six sessions, when all opportunities were seized upon.

A mixed methods approach was used to ensure that quantitative and qualitative data could be collected and analysed. However, the majority of responses were qualitative as the data set was relatively small and the richness of the project was determined by the depth of the responses, rather than the breadth. Qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured, individualised interviews, as well as from the written responses to the set tasks. Reflections were given verbally and recorded on camera for the students that preferred to do this, rather than providing a written response. The videos allowed for a depth of responses appropriate to the level of each student and responses were not compromised because of a lack of literacy or writing skills (Williamson et al., 2017). Some observations from the mentors themselves were taken into account, but the focus was firmly on the perceptions and outcomes that the boys shared.

To ensure that the action research was credible and authentic, the use of all qualitative data from interviews, written responses and set tasks was judiciously selected to answer the research questions. Furthermore, this allowed for cross referencing and polyangulation, ensuring the materials and sources aided consistency i.e. the data created from the interviews were in line with that of the written responses. All data were coded throughout, and inferences drawn across the range. The cross referencing across the materials took into account that some boys were more articulate when working with one set of materials over another. The benefit of this was the ability for the research to draw upon stronger conclusions and observations (Mertler, 2017).

Once the data had been collected, the action research entered an analysis phase, whereby the responses gathered were organised and coded. Given that all participants were involved in the range of methods (semi-structured interviews, surveys and written responses) the responses were larger in number. An inductive analysis was instigated, which looked at patterns, trends and thematic approaches to produce a consistent framework that represented the main findings (Maxwell and Reybold, 2015).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout all aspects of this action research and students were afforded anonymity when providing responses. Data were kept securely in locked storage. Due to the nature of the action research, parents were also requested to provide consent for their sons to participate.

Analysis and Findings

The data for the findings of this study were taken across multiple captures, namely, surveys (pre and post project), semi-structured interviews, group interaction sessions involving participants and observations.

Through coding and grouping of the data set, consistent themes began to emerge in relation to the students' voices around how they best felt mentoring could serve them. Of the 17 participants of this project, five had been involved in mentoring of some type before. None of those five boys were given a choice as to who they were paired with or the process of the mentoring itself. Upon receipt of this information in a semi-structured interview format, it afforded me the opportunity to probe this notion further. The boys in question stated that they felt they had either caused a problem or needed a problem solved and hence this provided a rationale for them to be mentored. Interestingly, these boys felt that this led to ineffective mentoring, as they weren't connected or did not have much in common with their mentor. As such, this confirmed my initial intuition that working through a process of creating more meaningful mentor partnerships was a viable and worthy action research project.

Of the 12 boys who had not been in a mentoring relationship before, the majority felt that mentoring was not something that they wanted to be engaged with, as there were not any perceived problems in their lives. This supported the idea that mentoring is often carried out from a deficit perspective and is not always approached from a strength based viewpoint, thus highlighting that it is not a valued aspect or feature of support (Schwartz, et al., 2016). For the avoidance of doubt, in this context, a strength based approach is viewed as something that aims to highlight and draw upon an individual's own self-determination and positive characteristics. Philosophically, this is a way of viewing a boy as a person with innate resources, which allows them to be positive and resilient in the face of adversity (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

The three most prevalent themes emerging from my analysis of the data were:

Relational Connections Mattered

The responses related to students being given a voice in selecting who they would like to be mentored by was a particularly interesting feature of the findings. All boys, in one form or another, stated that having a connection (or something in common) with a potential mentor was of utmost importance to them. In the pre-survey, the common thread was that having a mentor with a shared interest was key to making the relationship viable and successful. The boys also felt that being empowered to state the characteristics of who they felt they could work with was a positive and ensured they were invested in the process from the outset. In one of the semi-structured interviews, one student commented, "I have never been asked about what type of person or personality would be the best mentor for me before. I've always felt that I have to change to fit them. If I am changing to suit what they want, is the real me actually being mentored?"

Empathy was Valued

Consistently, the notion that having a mentor who understood or could empathise with a boy was a key facet of the depth of the relationship, in the opinion of the participants. Understanding was referred to in other forms, such as the mentor's patience and empathy for the mentee. An understanding of mentoring style was seen by the boys as recognising the mentee's current needs and situation, supporting the mentee, and reaffirming his confidence. Terms which supported this notion included, "approachability," "kindness," and "consideration." When the boys were asked the extent to which they felt this deepened the relationship between the mentor and mentee, it was unanimously affirmative that it was a huge factor in the success of their positive outcomes. Many participants mentioned how valuable having something in common with their mentor was to them, one such example being, "I just think that we clicked on some big issues, but also some little things too. I'm not saying that we have to be best mates but speaking to someone that you know shares some similar thinking with you made it so much easier, probably for both of us."

Level of Autonomy Nurtured a Sense of Agency

The boys also stated that they were surprised by the level of autonomy that they were given both in the selection of their mentor, i.e. stating the personality traits/characteristics that they felt suited them best, and also the scope they were afforded by said mentor in order to discuss topics of interest and meaning that they felt most relevant to them. This theme was expressed through one of the interview comments: "I just felt going into it that I had a bit of control and invested. I know I hadn't met them before, but I had shared what type of person I thought I would like to be matched with and that out me at ease from the start."

Several boys highlighted the increased level of responsibility and/or personal investment in the mentor relationship and because of this, a greater willingness to engage with the process. Further evidence to support this notion of investment was also shown by the appreciation that mentor meetings were scheduled by the boys at times and places of their convenience. Insights shared when this was discussed had a practical and pragmatic implication, in that the boys felt more able to avoid clashes with other commitments (sports practices, homework deadlines etc.), but the wider positivity created was central to the notions of trust (Smith, 2011). In this context, the notions of trust were determined from the BASICS model that formed a feature of the mentor training. Namely, working towards a cultivation of belonging, aspiration, safety, identity, challenge and success (Wolfe, 2010). With the onus and responsibility placed upon the student to create the meetings, the boys felt a stronger sense of loyalty to the partnership and a deeper level of engagement/investment. This was discussed by a number of boys who made mention of a stronger desire to be present and active in the mentoring conversations as it was themselves who set it up.

A heartening theme that became evident during the group interactions was the idea that the boys felt their mentor was interested in them as people first and foremost and that they had something in common with them. When probed further on this, the boys felt that the way they were "matched," i.e. the boys guiding the process, allowed for a more instant connection and formed the basis of their first couple of sessions, which was then leveraged off. In the exit interviews, all the boys said that they would be open to a mentoring relationship or programme in the future, with many saying that they felt some of the stigma or negativity around seeing a mentor had been removed for them.

Discussion

Adolescence is a time during which positive adults outside the familial context may be most influential to development. A growing body of research on naturally occurring mentors has found favorable outcomes for youth who have these types of positive adult figures in their lives. The most significant relationships with non-parental/non-familial figures are formal mentors and act substantially as a protective factor against a wide range of negative outcomes (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). This relatively well established research formed the catalyst for this project, with the intention of utilising a student agency component to understand how an increased level of autonomy and responsibility could further strengthen the processes and outcomes. Primarily, this was due to the fact that in many school contexts, a boy is assigned a mentor with little to no consideration given to the nuances of the success of the relationship itself (Miranda-Chan, et al., 2016).

The results and insights garnered from the participants in this action research highlight the importance of a more organic and naturally emerging mentoring relationship, that the boy himself has the voice and autonomy to control. This was best expressed when one student stated:

> "I actually want this to work for me, I need it to work for me. I am always going to be so much more likely to engage when I can put my mark on something. don't mean that in an arrogant way, I'm just saying that I need to feel I am guiding things a bit as well, if I am having to open myself up to someone."

The finding that the presence of a "boy-approved" mentor is related to positive youth outcomes is in line with the conclusions from a systematic review of natural mentoring in foster care (Thompson, et al. 2016). Furthermore, the positive finding for the quality of a more natural mentoring relationship is consistent with a meta-analysis on mentoring relationships in general (i.e., where no distinction was made between formal and natural relationships), which showed that high-quality relationships were associated with more support and improved youth outcomes (Eby et al., 2013). Developing high-quality relationships requires spending time and getting to know each other. The more frequently the mentor and the student interact, and the more satisfying the relationship is, the greater the opportunity for the mentor to provide the boy with experiences of social support (Van Dam et al., 2018).

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

This action research has been particularly enlightening for myself, providing significant opportunities for the boys involved to exercise their leadership and insightful for the staff that performed the role of a mentor. All in all, it would be fair to say that this has strengthened our school community as a whole. The recommendations outlined are designed to allow any interested party or school the requisite knowledge to start (or modify) their mentoring to be more reflective of student voice, more research focussed and better aligned to ensure the boys involved take on more responsibility.

First and foremost, the boys' needs and wants have to be placed at the heart of the relationship. The task of drawing up a list of aspirational qualities or "person specification" as to the essential traits the boys feel is required in a successful mentor should not be overlooked. Getting this process right from the outset ensures a lot of the "matching" is made easier and both the mentor and the mentee are aligned across some shared values.

An additional avenue to pursue would be the taking into account the activities that mentors, and boys do not prefer, in addition to those activities they like. An interesting insight would be to encourage mentors to actively engage around youth interests, even when they do not necessarily match with the mentor's preferences. This idea is consistent with previous work highlighting the effectiveness of developmental, or relationship-oriented, approaches to youth mentoring. In developmental relationships, the mentor emphasises boys' needs and decision-making, with an eye toward providing new opportunities and support for them (Reichert, 2019). Such an approach is in contrast to a prescriptive approach, which can tend to ignore the specific preferences of boys as the mentor plans activities in the service of certain goals or expectations not shared by the boy(s) themselves (Raposa et al., 2019).

The success of this process also relied upon the quality of the mentors themselves. This project utilised staff in the school who were non-teachers and who volunteered to take part in something beyond the confines of their employed role. We benefited hugely from the willingness, enthusiasm and vigour that our non-teaching staff showed throughout. This action research did not relate to the quality of the mentors, but it is worth noting that ensuring mentors are genuinely invested, willing to undertake professional development, and care about giving boys a voice in the process is of paramount importance. Getting the right type of professional development created impact for the mentors. We sourced some external PD from a mentoring charity, which was a quality investment and really showed our staff that we were willing to seek the best training for them. I really felt that this ensured they gave their best to the process as well, owing to how professional the initial start-up was for the mentors.

Reflection

I am extremely grateful, both personally and professionally, to the IBSC for allowing me to take part in this action research project. The opportunity has really allowed me to gain a much better insight into an area that I have always been interested in but had not viewed from a research perspective. I am thankful that my school and Headmaster have been so supportive throughout this process and allowed me to trial new ideas. Following the action research cycle has been a superb way to see a project through to completion and I have learnt so much by structuring things with an action research cycle. As well as the project being something that will carry on and be embedded into our school, two other positive aspects have now emerged. Firstly, as a school, we have agreed to offering in-house action research on a yearly basis for any interested staff. 2020 will see the launch of this professional learning opportunity and already we have a number of quality staff interested. Secondly, through my learning and understanding in this area, I was encouraged to apply for a position as a Board Member on the Sir Graeme Dingle Foundation (Auckland). I successfully completed an interview and was offered a place on their board, which I duly accepted. The Sir Graeme Dingle Foundation is New Zealand's largest youth mentoring charity which runs mentoring programmes for 28,000 young people annually from age 5-18 years old. I am excited to see how this position develops and the ways in which I can use the research from this project to better the outcomes for young people in New Zealand.

I would like to finish this reflection with a genuine and heartfelt thank you to my supervisor, Trish Cislak. The countless hours of support have not been lost on me and I have found her passion and dedication inspiring, she has my utmost respect and admiration.

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