Adolescent Peer Mentoring:
Development theories, studies, and application for youth development leaders

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Introduction

Mentoring and tutoring have become popular among positive youth development programs and much research has been done on the effectiveness of such programs (Powell, 1997, p. 3, 39). Tutoring is defined as “assistance that is provided to students by non-professionals to help them attain grade-level proficiency in basic skills” and mentoring is defined as “a one-to-one relationship between an older person and a younger one… to pass on knowledge, experience, and judgment, or to provide guidance and friendship” (Powell, 1997, p. 3, 39). Much of the research focuses on academic tutoring or mentoring by adults; however, peer assistance programs utilizing adolescents in the mentor/tutor role have also become popular in youth programs (Powell, 1997, p. 13). In the case of many peer tutoring programs, the tutor and tutee form “positive personal bonds” that reflect a relationship that goes beyond tutoring into the realm of mentoring (Powell, 1997, p. 4). The research on the affects of mentoring or tutoring on adolescent mentors/tutors is minimal at this time. For these reasons, this paper will use examples of both mentoring and tutoring to explore the cognitive and emotional advantages on adolescents who assist younger students or peers.

Adolescent Development Theories

Psychosocial Development

In adolescence, youth are moving from childhood to young adulthood and thus experience the challenge of understanding their place in the world (Powell, 1997, p. 7). Eric Erikson’s Psychosocial Stage Theory explains that youth’s “identity crisis” marks a time when
youth perform an “intense exploration of potential identities” that involves the self and relationships with the community, peers, family, and adults (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 592-93). Peer mentoring and tutoring programs involving adolescents in the role of a teacher can help youth explore new relationships with adults and peers through testing an adult role. This exploration uses “Role Theory” – where an individual explores the shift in behavioral expectations involved in taking on a new role (Powell, 1997, p. 7). Youth programs that incorporate a peer mentoring or tutoring component can offer a good stage-environment fit for adolescents by allowing them to explore how it feels to be in an adult role and allowing them to take on new responsibilities (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 582).

**Emotional Development**

During this time of finding a new identity, adolescents struggle with acceptance, self-esteem, and failure (Kearney, 2014, p. 146). Adolescents need to be encouraged in critical and independent thinking and given guidance from adults on beliefs and values (Kearney, 2014, p. 147). They want to be treated like adults and therefore will thrive when given the type of responsibility that they receive as a peer mentor/tutor (Kearney, 2014, p. 150). Accepting responsibility and dealing with the challenges it presents allows students to learn from failure and improve their self-esteem after succeeding (Kearney, 2014, p. 145-150).

**Cognitive Development**

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory explains that adolescents develop through shared experiences with peers, younger youth, and adults (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 562). Although many of these experiences happen during school, youth development programs offer another place for youth to share experiences (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 562). Vygotsky’s theory also includes how adolescents learn “academic language,” a term used to explain the vocabulary, core
concepts, and abstract ideas of a specific discipline (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 562). Adolescents first learn academic language through “receptive understanding,” where they memorize vocabulary, systems, and processes (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 563). Through peer assistance, adolescents can deepen their “conceptual understanding” and “interpretive understanding” of a topic by sharing tools and explaining concepts to other students (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 563). Peer assistance can also help adolescents develop improved metacognition – where they can think about their own and others’ thought processes – and improved intersubjectivity – where the tutor understands the difficulty the tutee is having with a subject and is able to bring the tutee to a place of shared understanding about the concept (Hauser & Cram, 2014, p. 567, 565).

**Review of Empirical Studies**

In the field of positive youth development, there are few studies that focus on the effect that peer mentoring or tutoring has on the mentor/tutor himself. The studies listed in this section have the most information regarding the adolescent in the role instructor or advisor, although most aren’t specifically focused on that topic. The studies of the Youth Tutoring Youth programs and the Secondary Schools Basic Skills Demonstration Assistance programs also show results of adolescent mentoring or tutoring across America over several years. The research from those studies can show results that reflect adolescents as a whole group, not just from a small group of adolescents of a particular demographic or city.

**Learning and Growing Through Tutoring: A Case Study of Youth Tutoring Youth**

This study, published in 1974, highlights a program created by the National Commission on Resources for Youth in which a teacher supervised a group of high school tutors who were matched to younger youth. The high school youth, all of whom were behind in school or labeled as “problems,” were trained and paid for their tutoring work (Dollar, 1974, p. 9). According to
the study, the parents and teachers of the high school tutors in the pilot of the program reported a positive change in the students’ attitudes and a growth in the students’ confidence and pride in their “role as a teacher” (Dollar, 1974, p. 10). The standardized tests that were evaluated by the program showed that the tutors showed an increase in reading ability (Dollar, 1974, p. 10). Only seven of the 200 high school tutors dropped out of the pilot program, which the study touts as proof that the tutors had sustained interest in the program (Dollar, 1974, p. 10). Of the programs conducted in over 500 cities after the pilot, the study reports that the most successful programs allowed the tutors to take the majority of the responsibility for their work and their tutee, which allowed the tutors to develop and exercise many important cognitive and emotional skills, such as autonomy, self-esteem, and empathy (Dollar, 1974, p. 119-122). The tutors reported that they were learning along with their tutees and that this gave them greater confidence and self-esteem (Dollar, 1974, p. 123). A limitation of this study is that no comparison group was used.

Peer Tutoring and Mentoring Services for Disadvantaged Secondary School Students

This study is a mass review of the efforts of peer tutoring and mentoring programs that received a one-year government grant in 1990 from the U.S. Department of Education (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 5, 17). Like the Youth Tutoring Youth programs above, these programs were held across America but also included Puerto Rican cities (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 5). The programs in this study were organized by 31 school districts (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 5). More than a third of the programs were located in rural areas and almost half were located in urban areas, all serving “roughly equal numbers of White, Black, and Hispanic students” (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 7). Thirty-eight percent of peer tutors were white, another 38 percent were black, and 16 percent were Hispanic (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 7). Goals for the tutees focused on overall academic achievement through improvement of grade point averages, test scores, and students passing
courses (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 7). Goals for the adolescent peer tutors, in addition to academic achievement, included increasing self-esteem and leadership skills (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 7). A limitation of this study is that no comparison group was used. The study reported that the programs achieved only limited success, which it attributes to the short duration and fast-track (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 80). However, successful programs revealed five categories of promising practices, which will be reviewed in the Applications for Youth Leaders section of this paper.

**Increases in Academic Connectedness and Self Esteem Among High School Students Who Serve as Cross-Age Peer Mentors**

This study examines the changes in self-esteem, attachment, and connectedness in adolescent mentors (Karcher, 2009, p. 292). The 46 high school mentors involved in this study were compared to 45 other high school students who were not involved in mentoring (Karcher, 2009, p. 293). Mentors participated in training and were supervised by an adult, much like the Youth Tutoring Youth programs above (Karcher, 2009, p. 293). From September to May, mentors and mentees met weekly after school and monthly on Saturdays to participate in icebreaker activities, a “connectedness curriculum activity”, and group games or recreation (Karcher, 2009, p. 294). All students were surveyed at the beginning at end of the program with a survey that included questions regarding caring and involvement in relationships, trust and communication in parent and peer relationships, and self-esteem (Karcher, 2009, p. 295). The study reported that although the adolescent mentors showed no difference on questions about family relationships when compared to the control group, they did show a positive change on school-related questions about self-esteem in school, relationships with teachers, and attachment to peers (Karcher, 2009, p. 296). These results are comparable to the results from the Youth Tutoring Youth example above. The limitations of this study were that a “non-equivalent
comparison group” was used, only half of the adolescents self-selected to be come mentors, and only self-report measures were used instead of also measuring academic achievement like the Youth Tutoring Youth and the U.S. Department of Education studies above (Karcher, 2009, p. 297). The study also used majority Caucasian mentors, unlike the wide demographic range seen in the U.S. Department of Education study (Karcher, 2009, p. 297).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research should merge the approaches of the three studies above. Namely, future research should include a wide demographic range and an equivalent comparison group. It would certainly be useful to conduct another large study of a mentoring/tutoring program across the country using the methods from the cross-age mentoring program above, including equivalent comparison groups for each site (Karcher, 2009, p. 293). However, as Karcher (2009) points out, both self-reports and academic evaluations should be performed in the evaluation of future programs (p. 297).

**Application for Youth Development Leaders**

From these studies, youth development leaders can learn about the positive implications of peer mentoring/tutoring on adolescents and best practices for implementing a peer mentoring or tutoring program. Peer mentoring/tutoring programs can improve academic performance as well as the general wellbeing of the youth involved (Powell, 1997, p. 5; Karcher, 2009, p. 296). Low achieving students who are placed in a mentoring role often show improved school attendance, reduced disciplinary referrals, and improved attitude towards school (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 80; Karcher, 2009, p. 296). These results are attributed to the adolescent’s increase in positive self-perception achieved by accomplishing goals and reasoning through and solving problems (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 39). Often, these results occurred in programs where the adolescents were
tutoring younger students and receiving related services, such as mentoring, training, or monitoring (Pringle et al., 1993, p. 73; Karcher, 2009, p. 296; Dollar, 1974, p. 124). The conclusions drawn by various studies explain that adolescent tutors achieve academic improvement along with their tutees because the act of teaching helps the tutor himself gain a fuller understanding of the subject matter (Dollar, 1974, p. 122).

Strategies for mentoring/tutoring programs apply to the youth and adults involved, the youths’ goals, and the structure of the program:

- Selecting at-risk students to serve as tutors and training these tutors to act as mentors is successful in reducing the stigma of receiving for academic assistance (Pringle et al., 1993, p. 9).

- Match tutors and tutees on a one-to-one ratio (Pringle et al., 1993, p. 9; Dollar, 1974, p. 124).

- Programs should be well structured with either structured activities for mentoring programs or structured time for tutoring programs (Dollar, 1974, p. 117; Karcher, 2009, p. 298).

- Tutors need ongoing training and supervision by adults, although adults should allow the tutor to come to them for help or provide guidance when the tutee is not present to preserve the tutor’s autonomy and authority (Pringle et al., 1993, p. 9; Dollar, 1974, p. 117-118; Karcher, 2009, p. 298).

- Allow the adolescent tutors to “assume a major responsibility” in their role with the tutees and hold them accountable for their responsibility (Dollar, 1974, p. 12-13).

- Provide incentives to adolescent tutors when necessary to help tutors see the importance of their work (Pringle et al., 1993, p. 9; Dollar, 1974, p. 9).
Community collaborations are most successful when programs utilize local colleges/universities or professional organizations (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 9).

Youth development leaders should realize that utilizing adolescents in peer mentoring or tutoring does not replace adult involvement. In spite of the advantages to the tutor and tutee, the research cautions youth leaders that tutoring should not be used as a substitute for quality instruction (Powell, 1997, p. 24). Peer tutoring can improve student perception of a subject in the presence of weak instruction but it will not necessarily improve academic performance (Powell, 1997, p. 24). The success of mentoring/tutoring programs are dependent on the active participation of an involved adult, which is paramount in the training and monitoring of adolescent mentors/tutors in such programs (Powell, 1997, p. 24). In fact, the most improvement found in these studies came from programs which matched the adolescent tutor with a teacher or community mentor (Pringle et al, 1993, p. 9; Dollar, 1974, p. 117-118; Karcher, 2009, p. 298). Although it may be difficult to achieve the kind of scaffolding where adolescents are mentored by adults and then mentor younger youth themselves, this kind of program offers depth of learning and achievement by youth.

Youth development leaders should keep in mind that thorough planning is paramount to success in these programs; it is the only way to ensure that a mentoring/tutoring program will be able to follow the strategies for success as outlined above. As with other types of programming, proper evaluation will show whether the program is successful and guide next steps for continuing the program. The most successful evaluations will include self-assessment by the adolescents and some way to test academic achievement. In addition to planning and evaluation, it is paramount for adults to realize that allowing the adolescents to take on responsibility is where they learn the most (Dollar, 1974, p. 12-13). Following these practices will guide youth
development leaders to organize and manage successful mentoring/tutoring programs; fueling a
deeper learning for the adolescents and allowing them to reach a higher level of cognitive and
emotional development.
References


Abstracts

Learning and Growing Through Tutoring: A Case Study of Youth Tutoring Youth

A case study, in-depth description, and analysis of a youth tutoring youth program are presented in this document. The approach used in preparing the study – mainly utilizing participant observation, site visits, and structured interviews are detailed in a separate chapter. This is followed by a chapter of background information in which the community and its schools are described, along with the process by which tutors and tutees were selected and how the program was initiated. A subsequent chapter introduces the ongoing program from the point of view of a visitor. The role of the supervising teacher, the relationship with, tutors, and relationship with tutees and their teachers are also examined. The lengthiest section of the report deals with the tutors and tutees themselves, focusing on them as they relate to each other in actual situations, through the use of field notes and extensive interviews. Remaining sections describe what happened to the program when its supervisor left and was replaced by a new teacher. The program described here is said to represent a good choice for a case study because it is so average (Dollar, 1974, p. 1).

Peer Tutoring and Mentoring Services for Disadvantaged Secondary School Students

The Secondary Schools Basic Skills Demonstration Assistance Program of 1988 offered school districts, through a competitive grant program, an opportunity to explore innovative ways of helping disadvantaged secondary school students attain grade level proficiency in basic and more advanced skills. In 1989, the sole year of funding, the program awarded 31 1-year grants to urban and rural schools in the United States and Puerto Rico. Almost half of the grants were in urban areas. An evaluation was commissioned to determine whether the academic achievement of secondary school students improved with participation and strategies that accounted for
improvements. Primary means of data collection were a survey of the grantees, 10 case studies, and analyses of student outcomes, including test scores that exceeded estimates of measurement error. Data from 13 grantees were used in this report. The overall message from the program evaluation is that under certain conditions peer tutoring and mentoring can be useful for addressing the educational and developmental needs of disadvantaged secondary school students. The program achieved limited success, but does support research on the effectiveness of peer tutoring. Teachers' responses were generally positive, as were parent perceptions of the effectiveness of tutoring. Eighteen tables present data about the programs, and an appendix lists the programs (Pringle et al, 1933, p. 1).

**Increases in Academic Connectedness and Self Esteem Among High School Students Who Serve as Cross-Age Peer Mentors**

Cross-age mentoring programs are peer helping programs in which high school students serve as mentors to younger children. The study in this article compared fall-to-spring changes on connectedness, attachment, and self-esteem between 46 teen mentors and 45 comparison classmates. Results revealed an association between serving as a cross-age peer mentor and improvements on academic self-esteem and connectedness. The American School Counselor Association regards coordinating a peer helping program as an appropriate activity for school counselors; this study supports this position (Karcher, 2009, p. 292).
Artifact

My artifact for this assignment is a website I created about adolescent peer mentoring: https://adolescentpeermentoring.wordpress.com/.

Home Page:

**Home**

**Why use peer mentoring with adolescents?**

Whether you work with at-risk teens who are having difficulty in school or want to offer a new opportunity to a group of over-achieving adolescents, peer mentoring can help youth develop important cognitive, emotional, academic, and leadership skills. In addition, youth can learn important lessons about their role in helping others achieve their goals.

This site has been established to help guide youthdevelopment professionals through the current research in adolescent peer mentoring and provide strategies to help them plan, conduct, and evaluate successful peer mentoring or tutoring programs.
Adolescent Development Page:

Adolescent Development

In adolescence, youth are moving from childhood to young adulthood and thus experience the challenge of understanding their place in the world. Explore the Psychosocial Development, Emotional Development, and Cognitive Development pages to learn about how adolescent development impacts different areas of youths' lives.

Psychosocial Development Subpage:

Psychosocial Development

Eric Erikson's Psychosocial Stage Theory explains that youth's "identity crisis" marks a time when youth perform an "intense exploration of potential identities" that involves the self and relationships with the community, peers, family, and adults. Peer mentoring and tutoring programs involving adolescents in the role of a teacher can help youth explore new relationships with adults and peers through testing an adult role. This exploration uses "Role Theory" - where an individual explores the shift in behavioral expectations involved in taking on a new role. Youth programs that incorporate a peer mentoring or tutoring component can offer a good stage-environment fit for adolescents by allowing them to explore how it feels to be in an adult role and allowing them to take on new responsibilities.
Emotional Development Subpage:

Emotional Development

During this time of finding a new identity, adolescents struggle with acceptance, self-esteem, and failure. Adolescents need to be encouraged in critical and independent thinking and given guidance from adults on beliefs and values. They want to be treated like adults and therefore will thrive when given the type of responsibility that they receive as a peer mentor/tutor. Accepting responsibility and dealing with the challenges it presents allows students to learn from failure and improve their self-esteem after succeeding.

Cognitive Development Subpage:

Cognitive Development

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory explains that adolescents develop through shared experiences with peers, younger youth, and adults. Although many of these experiences happen during school, youth development programs offer another place for youth to share experiences. Vygotsky’s theory also includes how adolescents learn “academic language,” a term used to explain the vocabulary, core concepts, and abstract ideas of a specific discipline. Adolescents first learn academic language through “receptive understanding,” where they memorize vocabulary, systems, and processes. Through peer assistance, adolescents can deepen their “conceptual understanding” and “interpretive understanding” of a topic by sharing tools and explaining concepts to other students. Peer assistance can also help adolescents develop improved metacognition – where they can think about their own and others’ thought processes – and improved intersubjectivity – where the tutor understands the difficulty the tutee is having with a subject and is able to bring the tutee to a place of shared understanding about the concept.
Successful Strategies Page:

**Successful Strategies**

This page outlines best practices and strategies of peer mentoring/tutoring programs as presented in current research.

![Image of two individuals working together]

**Strategies**

- Match tutors and tutees on a one-to-one ratio.
- Programs should be well structured with either structured activities for mentoring programs or structured time for tutoring programs.
- Tutors need ongoing training and supervision by adults, although adults should allow the tutor to come to them for help or provide guidance when the tutee is not present to preserve the tutor’s autonomy and authority.
- Allow the adolescent tutors to “assume a major responsibility” in their role with the tutees and hold them accountable for their responsibility.
- Provide incentives to adolescent tutors when necessary to help tutors see the importance of their work.
- Community collaborations are most successful when programs utilize local colleges/universities or professional organizations.
Benefits

- Adolescent's experience an increase in positive self-perception through accomplishing goals and reasoning through and solving problems. Often, these results occurred in programs where the adolescents were tutoring younger students and receiving related services, such as mentoring, training, or monitoring.
- Peer mentoring/tutoring programs can improve academic performance as well as youths’ general wellbeing. Adolescent tutors achieve academic improvement along with their tutees because the act of teaching helps the tutor himself gain a fuller understanding of the subject matter.
- Utilizing at-risk students as tutors and training these tutors to act as mentors is successful in reducing the stigma of receiving for academic assistance. Low achieving students who are placed in a mentoring role often show improved school attendance, reduced disciplinary referrals, and improved attitude towards school.

Caveat

Youth development leaders should realize that utilizing adolescents in peer mentoring or tutoring does not replace adult involvement. In spite of the advantages to the tutor and tutee, the research cautions youth leaders that tutoring should not be used as a substitute for quality instruction. Peer tutoring can improve student perception of a subject in the presence of weak instruction but it will not necessarily improve academic performance. The success of mentoring/tutoring programs are dependent on the active participation of an involved adult, which is paramount in the training and monitoring of adolescent mentors/tutors in such programs. In fact, the most improvement found in these studies came from programs which matched the adolescent tutor with a teacher or community mentor. Although it may be difficult to achieve the kind of scaffolding where adolescents are mentored by adults and then mentor younger youth themselves, this kind of program offers depth of learning and achievement by youth.

Final Thoughts

Youth development leaders should keep in mind that thorough planning is paramount to success in these programs; it is the only way to ensure that a mentoring/tutoring program will be able to follow the strategies for success as outlined above. As with other types of programming, proper evaluation will show whether the program is successful and guide next steps for continuing the program. The most successful evaluations will include self-assessment by the adolescents and some way to test academic achievement. In addition to planning and evaluation, it is paramount for adults to realize that allowing the adolescents to take on responsibility is where they learn the most. Following these practices will guide youth development leaders to organize and manage successful mentoring/tutoring programs; fueling a deeper learning for the adolescents and allowing them to reach a higher level of cognitive and emotional development.
Mentoring the Future Page (Blog):

**E-Mentoring**

**APRIL 25, 2016 / KRISHEBARGER / EDIT**

E-mentoring is “a relationship in which a mentor, usually a more experienced or an older person, provides guidance and support to a less experienced or younger person... via distance communication technologies.” According to Clark and Sheridan (2010), technology “holds great potential for traditionally underserved communities to access rich learning environments.” Using e-mentoring allows youth programs to support four essential characteristics of learning: active engagement, participation in groups, frequent interaction and feedback, and connections to the real-world.

E-mentoring can occur using asynchronous communication or synchronous communication. Asynchronous communication consists of the exchange of electronic text as in email, discussion boards, or messaging systems. Synchronous communication is where mentors and mentees can communicate in real time, as with the use of telephone and video conferencing. E-mentoring can consist of only asynchronous communication (CMC-only), a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous (CMC-primary), or a mixture of online communication and face-to-face communication (CMC-supplemental). Synchronous communication allows of the “attainment of social presence” with the mentor, which studies show is important for the success of e-mentoring relationship. By incorporating asynchronous as well as synchronous communication, students participating in e-mentoring programs can improve their cognitive abilities and written communication skills.

**The Mentor Effect**

**APRIL 24, 2016 / LEAVE A COMMENT / EDIT**

This post is a personal reflection written by Katie Rishebarger about her interest in mentoring, specifically with adolescents, and her calling to work with youth.

One cold Saturday morning around 7 am in November of 2013, I was driving a gaudy red minivan whose paint was doing a terrible job of covering the faded spaces where lettered decals once spelled out “Chester Fire Dept.” The back was stuffed with luggage and boxes of event supplies, with three of my Youth Science Team boys in the middle row and Rae’L, my sole female team member, riding shotgun. We were headed to Berkeley Electric Cooperative’s Annual Meeting for the first time.

It was six months after I had graduated from college and decided to continue my internship as a volunteer because I was helping to create a program that I thought would help change the world. The world for youth in South Carolina, at least.

As it turns out, there’s a price tag to be able to have a job saving the world. We were trying to not only raise the funds to run the program, but also to hire someone to run it. I had put off getting a “real job” because I had high hopes that it would be me.

So I was following my GPS and another old van that wasn’t much to look at, but that also belonged to my local 4-H program. To help keep the kids stay awake and prepare them for the event, I was quizzing them on the six branches of our new program and having them practice the elevator speech that they would later give to people who walked up to our booth and asked them, “What is Science on the Move?” They were goofing off some, but I could tell that they were also honestly trying to remember the short statements that we’d been working on for the past couple of months. I had tried to make them easy to remember, but this was the first event that they would really need to remember them for.
References

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About the Author Page:

Katie Rishebarger is the 4-H Science on the Move coordinator for South Carolina 4-H, the Clemson Extension Service, and South Carolina’s Coalition for Mathematics and Science. During her work with 4-H, she became interested in adolescent peer mentoring for the 4-H Youth Science Team program, where high school youth learn leadership, presentation, and communication skills while learning about and teaching younger youth hands-on science activities.

Rishebarger created this page for her Child and Adolescent Development class while pursuing her master’s in Youth Development Leadership at Clemson University. She hopes to continue to update the content on the Mentoring the Future blog page during her master’s program while she continues to research best practices in the field for implementation in the 4-H Youth Science Team program.