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REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: EFFECTS OF PEER MENTORING ON MINORITY STUDENTS WITHIN AN URBAN SCHOOL SETTING

by
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the

Department of Educational Leadership

College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

April, 2011

Dissertation Chair: James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and critical friends who have supported me through this educational journey. Lindsay, I could not ask for a more caring and supportive wife. Your support and encouragement continue to push me to be my best, and I love you for that. Joella, it was your smile that got me through a number of these chapters and never ending edits, you are my heart. My parents, Linda and Robert McCarron, you have always believed in me but most importantly you taught me the importance of believing in myself. Gammy, you were always my biggest supporter and I know that you still are. I hope that I have made you proud. I miss and love you.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. James Coaxum, III, my dissertation chair, for all of his support and guidance through the doctoral program. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Susan Browne and Dr. Kathleen Sernak, for continually pushing me to dig deeper and put my thoughts on paper. I am thankful to each of you for going above and beyond as I completed this dissertation.

Lindsay it is because of you that I am even able to write this acknowledgements page. You and I have made a lot of little sacrifices along the way to see that I made it to this point. I look forward to enjoying the rest of our lives together and providing you with the same encouragement, support and love.

Abstract

Sean Robert McCarron
REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: EFFECTS OF PEER MENTORING ON
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2010/2011
James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.
Educational Leadership

The extent to which school and community resources are utilized by partially proficient students affects their academic and social proficiency (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Shann, 2001). All too often a school system will initiate new programs and resources without adequately targeting the students who would benefit most, or not provide the management and leadership necessary, causing the support systems to be ineffective (Munoz, Ross, & McDonald, 2007). Regardless of the varying support systems in place at Wayside Middle School, four subgroups of students have not been achieving academic proficiency as identified by the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), the test given to all students in grades 3 through 8 in the state of New Jersey.

The purpose of my research was to look at the effects peer mentoring groups would have on moving a student from being identified as below proficient to proficiency. To accomplish my research purpose, I applied a mixed methods (Creswell, 2003) approach and identified the necessary steps for the action research to be successful. Within my action research cycles, I applied quantitative methods through a survey and data analysis identifying a baseline. In addition, qualitative methods of formal and informal observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the perceptions of students, staff, and parents allowing me to identify root causes for low performance. I used the data collected to identify the effects that peer mentoring groups

had on the selected students socially and academically. Through this research I found that although there were minor academic changes for the students involved, a greater impact was evident on the students overall enjoyment of school and ability to interact with others.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Research states that low performing minority students perform at higher levels when they are supported by others within their school and the surrounding community (Brown & Low, 2008; Carswell, Hanlon, O'Grady, Watts, & Pothong, 2009; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Gentle-Genitty, 2009; Munoz, Ross, & McDonald, 2007). The extent to which low performing students are supported within an educational setting has a direct correlation to their academic and social proficiency (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Shann, 2001). All too often a school system will initiate support systems without adequately identifying how to support the needs of the whole student, causing the support systems to be ineffective (Munoz et al., 2007). Many educators are not able to relate to low performing student populations or take into account the varying needs and life experiences of each student. This results in many teachers assisting students in a way that they believe is beneficial, providing their students with support that is not successful or accepted by the student (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Student proficiency, both academic and social, is dependent on the experiences and values that a student espouses (Griffin, 2006).

The knowledge base that students have when they enter school depends on their individual families and this has a direct relation to a student's academic and social ability when entering school and interacting with their peers (Brown & Low, 2008). A student who comes from a household that places a value on education or exposes their student to various experiences differs greatly from those students who come from households where education is not a top priority, due to negative schooling experiences or simply a mentality of survival based on lack of financial stability within their household. Many

students arrive at school with a preconceived idea of who they are based on the perceptions of those who care for them (Marrs, Hemmert, & Jansen, 2007). These espoused ideas of education cause many low performing minority students to not feel as though they fit within the educational domain, feeling that they are already labeled by the staff, or unable to find purpose in what is being taught. Teachers work with students based on a curriculum, and many times the curriculum is not targeted towards the specific needs or reading levels of the students receiving the instruction. Low performing students do not always have the background knowledge or motivation necessary to understand what is being taught. Payne (1994) discusses how many teachers do not come from the same background as their students and are unable to understand why their students are not performing well in class. When students are not able to relate to the materials being taught or the individual teacher, they are unable to attain the information and lose interest in the subject, reinforcing the idea that they do not belong.

Low performance of minority students within urban schools is a problem that researchers have repeatedly tried to identify and rectify root causes through the implementation of various programs (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross, McDonald, Alberg, & McSparrin-Gallegher, 2007; Shann, 2001; Towns, Cole-Henderson, & Serpell, 2001; Tyler & Boelter, 2008; & Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Towns et al. (2001) discuss urban schools and how in most cases they are not associated with educational excellence. Those urban schools where all of the stakeholders, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community have a shared vision see student successes more than similar schools where a common vision is not shared or established. Various school reform models have seen success in isolated cases, and this

success directly relates to the involvement of students and the passion and shared vision of those involved (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2007). Shann (2001) looked at programs implemented within urban schools through interviewing students within an inner-city middle school on how they spent their time outside of school. Only 33.8% of the students surveyed said they participated in school or community organization activities, with most students citing television and hanging out with friends as the majority of their time outside of school. Although there are school-based activities available to students within urban communities, they are not valued by those in the community resulting in a lack of participation and ultimately a reduction in services offered. Teacher involvement and expectations within urban school settings have a direct relation to student perceptions, achievement, and engagement within school (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Those teachers that show an interest in the school community and participate in activities provide students with an opportunity to relate to someone on a different level. Through this involvement in community and school activities an informal mentoring or role model relationship is established between students and staff.

The word mentor is traced back to Homer, in his famous poem "The Odyssey." In the poem, a man by the name of Mentor becomes the guardian and tutor for the son of Odysseus (The Mentoring Institute, 2001). A majority of the research done on mentoring is focused on those relationships at the college level. The research states the benefits seen for students academically, but a majority of the research notes the fact that faculty are not always able to relate to the academic issues that the students might be facing, offering the students' academic guidance that might not be realistic or attainable for the student. This disparity in background and academics ultimately affects the overall relationship between

the faculty member and student (Allen & Smith, 2008). Mentoring research looks at the importance of mentoring in an informal capacity and taking the relationship outside of the academic setting (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Although race plays a factor for students in every facet of their lives, students stated that having something in common with their mentor plays a larger role than having a mentor who is the same race (Lee, 1999). Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005) look at the difference between mentoring relationships based on gender. The research they conducted found that the female students mentored have better experiences and show greater achievement academically, in leadership capacities, and overall school enjoyment.

Establishment of programs, both in school and within the community, targeted towards low performing minority students can be effective in providing students with the exposure and knowledge necessary to achieve within an educational setting. When students are working with mentors or individuals who understand what is seen as the norm within the educational setting, students are provided with the necessary skills to navigate the system themselves. The research shows that this knowledge is gained through the establishment of programs targeted towards the needs of low performing minority groups (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998; Barry, Sutherland, & Harris, 2006; Carswell et al., 2009; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Ersing, 2008; Greenwood, 2008; Schacter & Jo, 2005).

Impetus for the Study / Rationale for the Study

Regardless of the varying support systems in place at Wayside Middle School, minority students have not achieved academic proficiency, as identified by the standardized state test (NJ ASK). The test is taken at the end of the each school year in

third through eighth grade, and the scores are then reported to the schools and parents by the beginning of the new school year. Addressing the needs of minority student populations has been an area the state has identified annually for Wayside Middle School. When reviewing the disaggregated data the sub- groups needing additional support are evident based on their performance the year prior.

During a Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) visit at Wayside Middle School, a team of professionals from the Department of Education who work with schools in need of improvement, addressed a question towards our administration as to what programming had been implemented within the school that addressed the needs of the identified partially proficient students. The answer that followed was that there was no programming targeted towards the identified student populations, but the programming implemented within the school was targeted towards every student. As a school in need of improvement (SINI) for six years, I identified this as an issue that needed to be addressed. I began questioning the programming activities that we had been implementing at Wayside Middle School and questioning how many of these programs were actually being utilized by students within our low performing sub groups. In order to address the needs of the identified low performing subgroups through focused conversations and dialogue, I decided to develop a peer mentoring group targeted directly towards the students that have been identified as partially proficient at Wayside Middle School.

In order to address the identified problem, I developed a peer mentoring group in an effort to modify their behaviors and perceptions towards schooling. High achieving students demonstrate both internal and external motivation that relates back to their

personal values and experiences instead of their socio-economic status (Griffin, 2006).

Research shows that many behaviors that students display stem from the way in which

they are brought up by their families, reflecting a cyclical process from one generation to

another (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). This action research project addressed the

needs of partially proficient students to see if they performed at higher levels when they

were supported by extra-curricular activities and academic support at the school level

through the implementation of peer mentoring groups. Although many of these resources

have always been available, these resources have not been fully utilized by the students

they were targeted to support.

The issue that I addressed through action research was the effects a peer

mentoring group had on partially proficient student populations academically and

socially. Within the school setting, a majority of the African American, Hispanic,

economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities were not achieving

proficiency on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). These

same students who demonstrated difficulties in the school setting academically also

demonstrated the same difficulties socially, evidenced through report cards and discipline

records. Through the implementation of peer mentoring groups, students were provided

with strategies to support one another within the educational setting. Eccles and

Templeton (2002) conclude that students who become involved in school activities

perform better within the academic setting.

It is my belief that everyone learns from their environment, whether what they

learn is positive or negative depends on the structure of the programming and support

they receive. A teacher's expectations, beliefs, and attitude towards individual students

and education has had a direct correlation to a student's perception of schooling

(Towns et al., 2001; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). The learning that takes place within school

is not always positive, occasionally causing students to become disaffected. It was my

goal through this action research project to work with students to overcome these

negative learning experiences and to assist them in developing a more positive attitude

towards their education.

Working with disadvantaged students has been something I have found

rewarding, and I was excited to dig deeper as I conducted this research. Throughout my

schooling, I have been blessed by the influence of two mentors. I believe that these

individuals have guided me to the success I have achieved, and I hope that I will have the

same influence on students and others throughout my life and career. Throughout this

chapter and dissertation, I reflect on the journey as I worked with minority students on

creating positive attitudes towards learning and self.

I established peer mentoring groups to see what effect students can have on each

other within a structured social environment. I selected this topic because I believe in the

influence of others and the power of mentoring. The school in which I conducted the

action research contains students within specific minority sub groups, and the term

minority is based on race, socio-economic status, and learning abilities. These students

are classified as minority because they were not receiving the same educational outcomes

as other students within their school. These were the students who were not making

proficiency based on four days of testing conducted by the state during the 2008-2009

school year, academic grades represented through report cards, and discipline records

identifying behaviors the student had demonstrated within the school setting. The school

is ranked by the State Department of Education based on the socio-economic status of the community, the performance of students on standardized tests, and the way in which disciplinary records are reported by the school to the state. All of this information is disseminated to the media and public. It is my belief that negative publicity perpetuates stereotypes within our urban communities and ultimately lowers the confidence of individual students within the school. Through this research, I hope that students have gained an awareness of resources available to them within their school and community and feel empowered to utilize these resources. When identifying the success of low performing students, Towns et al. (2001) found a common theme for the success of at-risk student populations to be faculty members going the extra mile.

The situation that Wayside Middle School faced was one that many schools face throughout the country. Over the past eight years the same sub groups of students had been labeled as partially proficient, not meeting academic requirements outlined and defined by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJ DOE) and measured through the state of New Jersey by the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). These findings placed the school and district in the classification of being labeled a School in Need of Improvement (SINI). Although many might see this as additional paperwork the state was putting the school through, the real problem was how this affected the students and staff members who were not seeing rewards for their efforts, and students and families who became disaffected from an educational system they believe failed them. Although these students were not labeled with a scarlet letter across their chests, many were the same students who were frustrated when they came to school and did not find value or purpose in what they were learning. This action research project

was a chance for the students to take control and ownership over their own education and develop positive relationships and perceptions of their school and themselves. The literature states that students who are vulnerable within their own communities are at risk for taking on negative social behaviors. When students, who are susceptible to poor influences, become involved with positive programming and after school activities, they can achieve (Anderson & Pellicar, 1998; Carswell et al., 2009; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009; Greenwood, 2008; Sax et al., 2005; Shann, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects peer mentoring can have in moving a student from partially proficient to proficiency within their own minority sub group. Peer mentoring within the literature defines peer mentoring as older students assisting younger students within a structured setting (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000). Peer mentoring, for the purpose of this action research study, was defined as students, within the same grade level, helping other students within the structured setting of my classroom. When reviewing student test scores, partial proficiency is any score below a 200 on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). Any student who receives a 200 or higher on the Language Arts or Mathematics sections is considered to be proficient in that area. The term minority is used to define race, within this research African American and Hispanic; social class or financial income of the student's family, which I am referring to our economically disadvantaged; and learning abilities or students who are classified as special education through their IEP (Individualized Educational Plans) will be referred to as students with

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disabilities. The way in which I am defining low performing is through partial proficiency on state test scores, poor academic reports, and behavior referrals. Academics consist of standardized test scores, grades, and goal setting abilities. Behaviors consist of discipline records, self esteem, which will be measured through a student's self perception, and the way in which each student interacts with their peers and school staff. It is my goal to implement individualized processes for each student to affect improvement and change. I will measure these improvements through the student's academic grades, discipline records, formal observations, informal observations, and goal setting abilities.

The purpose of this action research was to develop and implement a sustainable peer mentoring groups, providing low performing minority students the opportunity to develop positive academic and social experiences. The process in which students moved from partial proficiency to proficiency varied based on the facilitator or mentor and the individual needs of the identified students. For the purpose of this research, the process used was discussion groups, tutoring, and one on one consultation. Throughout the course of the 2009- 2010 school year, the processes implemented was measured through grades, behaviors, and surveys to measure the success of the peer mentoring groups and reassess the measures being taken. The outcomes varied and changed throughout the course of the study and depended on the needs of the students. The various processes implemented were flexible, in that they were changed as each intervention was assessed meeting the needs of the identified students. I then assessed the achievement for this study through the change, if any, academically or behaviorally of the selected students at various times throughout the course of the school year. Sustainability was measured through grades,

behaviors, and continued peer to peer interaction and support. Individual modifications were made as warranted by the student's performance and individual situation.

Moving forward with this project, I prepared myself for some of the challenges that I would encounter along the way. A constraint that I expected to see was keeping the students engaged in the group meetings throughout the course of the school year, providing each student with a purpose for their participation. The second challenge I faced was parent involvement. A majority of the parents of the students with whom I worked did not attend any school events and were disaffected parents based on their experiences in school as students. In order to see if there was a correlation between student perceptions and the perceptions of their parents, I had to earn the trust and support of the parents over the year through ongoing communication. I was able to get this information through informal conversations with the students and parent meetings. Receiving the approval and support of my school district was a challenge, as the superintendent, assistant superintendent and building principal would be retiring at the end of the school year, June 2010. I had developed relationships with these individuals and was concerned about rebuilding those supports with new administrators. I believe that effectively communicating my intentions with current and new staff has been essential for this project to be effective and sustainable.

Research Questions

I had chosen to use Argyris and Schön's (1974) Organizational Learning Process, consisting of six phases, since this model fit best within the context of the action research that was taking place. The Organizational Learning Process focuses on what the organization is already doing and making changes to the organization based on the

members of the organization and whether they were able to sustain the changes necessary. The phases within the Organizational Learning Process are (1) mapping the problem, (2) internalization, (3) testing the model, (4) inventing solutions, (5) producing interventions, and (6) studying the impact. Addressing the issues identified within the school; peer mentoring was seen as a necessary and welcomed intervention. This action research project used data from state testing and school reports to identify students and provide them with the knowledge of various opportunities and events available to the students within the school and community. Exposure to these opportunities encouraged student involvement in educational activities and, ultimately, resulted in student achievement (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Greenwood, 2008). The goal of this research was to create a sustainable intervention that was led and facilitated by the students. Through the design of the intervention, the goal was to intrinsically motivate each individual student to become independent and successful within the educational setting through the creation of positive experiences and support (Griffin, 2008). Through the development of peer mentoring groups, the participants were free to participate as they chose during the weekly meetings and were made aware of various activities within the school and community, but only participating on their own accord. I wanted this process to be enjoyable for the students, and I believed that this was the way in which they could gain the most from the experience. As a group we discussed various issues that the students faced within school and in their everyday lives, and we then identified the conflicting views they might have when deciding on how to address these internal and external conflicts that they were facing on a daily basis.

Providing students with an environment where they could develop the skills necessary to offer positive advice and guidance to their peers concerning social and academic issues, it was my hope that double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974) had taken place and the affect would reach beyond the students to the circle of friends each of the students associated. Double loop learning took place because of the peer mentoring groups, but the group dynamics continually changed based on the needs of the participating students. Double loop learning allowed me to continually review what was happening to identify the effectiveness of the intervention implemented, and to adjust the process as it was deemed necessary to best fit the needs of each student. In the future, the following steps will have to take place for any identified student: Identifying, Implementing, Participating, and Training. Students were identified, a peer mentoring group was implemented, students participated in the peer mentoring group and took part in various activities throughout the course of the school year, students were trained on how to work with incoming students, and the entire process would start over. Involving new students each year will allow them to take ownership of the peer mentoring process, a staff member will have to be available to ensure there is a focus during the peer mentoring sessions. The purpose of the staff member being present, in the research that was me, was to ensure the conversation of the students is focused and the advice being offered is appropriate. It has been my responsibility, as the researcher, to propose the implementation for changes that will encourage student success to school administration. Changes in how the organization addresses the needs of low performing students resulted in a double loop learning environment where students were identified and provided with a positive learning experience, and where interventions were implemented because they

worked for their specific needs, not because they were mandated within the confines of the program. It was important that all stakeholders involved through this process shared a common goal and vision that revolved around student success (Towns et al., 2001). This framework provided students with an environment where they felt comfortable interacting and communicating openly with their peer mentors or facilitator.

To accomplish the purpose of my research, I explored the dimensions of the following research questions:

1. What perceptions did low performing students at Wayside Middle School hold towards school?

2. How did peer mentoring impact the social issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

3. How did peer mentoring impact the academic issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

4. What influence did students have on their peers when working in a mentoring capacity?

5. How did my leadership theory affect the relationships between teachers and the identified low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

The first question identifies the individual perceptions of the student towards education. Through this information, I was hoping to see where students develop their perceptions of schooling and how it affects them in school. I questioned whether or not this can be changed. It had been my hope that through my communication with each student and their communication with each other throughout the course of the school year

their perceptions of school will improve, ultimately affecting their abilities academically and behaviorally.

The second and third research questions looked at how mentoring affects students academically and socially. The term mentoring refers to the process it takes to move a student from "partially proficient" to "proficient." This process varies based on the needs of the students and the responses or feedback I get from them throughout the course of the school year. Altering the process throughout the course of this project will hopefully tailor the experience that each student has and create a positive educational experience. I believe that it was also important to understand that their experiences will be influenced not only by what happens in school but also by what takes place at home and the perceptions of those the student comes in contact.

The fourth research question that I have identified for this project is looking at the effects students have on each other. As I worked with the students in a group setting, formally or informally, I wanted them to judge their own ability to offer good advice and whether or not they feel as though they have received good advice in return. I was interested to see if students' perceptions of their peers change from the beginning of the year to the end, and I want to see if there is a trust built among the group of students who will be working together regularly. I also believe that by students helping others make good decisions they will in turn help themselves.

The final question I ask relates to my leadership and how I am able to effect sustainable change among the identified students. I feel as though I will not be able to fully answer this question until the end of the school year, when I have had the ability to work with the students and staff for an entire school year. Even then, I needed to see if

this change was sustainable. It was my goal that through the changed perception of students, the originally identified students would have the ability to be successful on their own or at least know what resources were available to them when they were in trouble or not doing well. I measured my leadership through the reflective journals I kept throughout the course of this research.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research was to learn what processes or resources were beneficial for students to create a positive perception of their school and self. Although a number of programs had been implemented in the past to assist students, none of these programs have specifically targeted their individual needs, as illustrated by their continued low performance and lack of participation in extracurricular activities (Shann, 2001). It is my hope that through this project, I have assisted these students as a facilitator and they are able to assist one another as peer mentors. The purpose of this research was to not only provide the participating students with resources but to teach each of the students how to collaboratively identify the skills necessary to create an environment where each student is able to take ownership of their learning and future. Marrs et al. (2007) discuss the difficulty most low performing students face, having preconceived ideas of who they are and what defines them, when trying to overcome low academic and social abilities.

This action research is important because it looks at the peer group dynamic of like students. Unlike the power struggles cited with other research concerning peer groups (Colvin, 2007), there were no power struggles within the peer mentoring group developed in this action research because every student within the group came from

similar social and educational backgrounds. For many of the peer groups discussed within the research, the peer relationship was built on an upperclassman and a new student or a student who was performing well paired with a student facing difficulties (Antonio, 2004; Colvin, 2007; Good et al., 2000). Providing my students with a structured setting where they were responsible for offering positive suggestions gave them the ability to view themselves as a positive influence outside of the group meetings.

It was essential to share my findings with staff members and administration to demonstrate how the information I had collected throughout the year was valid within the context of the school environment. This conversation was done through weekly team meetings with the faculty, and at the conclusion of the first cycle of the study. When finished, I triangulated the information that I collected from various sources: surveys, interviews, observations, test scores, academic grades, and discipline referrals, identifying the specific needs of the students and what processes were necessary for them to be successful. A change in behavior, whether it be academic, social, or both showing that there has been a change in the students, due to the action research, but taking into the fact that it was developmental was the goal of this action research study. Various reinforcement strategies were selected when I identified students who needed additional support and were eligible to participate in the action research study. The reason why this research is significant is because the effects positively affect students who had not been successful in the past. I believe that this project could turn disaffected students to affected students and this can change what was once a negative cyclical environment into something more positive.

When I chose this project, I was aware of the significance in working with students and parents to understand their perceptions of school and self. Although the parents of the students I worked with were not always available, I gained parental perception through observations and field notes, allowing me to compare their attitudes with the perceptions and behaviors of their students. I was aware that their participation played a significant role within my research, since a student's perception is greatly influenced by that of the parents. I also realized that a lack of participation on the part of the parents is research in itself.

I believe that mentoring can provide students with valuable conversations and experiences that might not be available to them otherwise. I went into the field of education because I enjoy helping others, and there is something special about teaching students something they have yet to discover. I have taken for granted the experience my own parents provided me and quickly realized, when entering the field of education, that not every student is blessed with the same opportunities. Although some students might have fewer experiences, all students are expected to know and retain the same information.

I mentored seven sixth grade students within my middle school. I worked with these students together as a group and individually. Prior to this action research project, I had been a formal mentor to a total of four individuals, three through a community based organization, and one through my current school district. The major difference between community based mentoring and mentoring through the school district is the fact that the school district allows teachers to have a say in who they want as their mentees. This allows teachers to think about who they could develop the closest working relationship

with and have the greatest impact. As a community based mentor it is more difficult for the mentee to develop the trust and willingness to talk with someone they know nothing about (Greenwood, 2008). Although I feel as though I grew a lot as an individual and my mentees also took a lot from the mentoring experience, community based mentoring is much more difficult to begin since the mentor must show interest in the community based agency. I have been fortunate to have so many mentors throughout my own schooling experience. These mentors were not formal mentors, but individuals who were willing to assist me in becoming a better student and a better educator. It is important to not allow the formality of a title ruin the knowledge and experiences that others take from their mentoring relationships. I am a product of the positive effects that mentoring and strong relationships can have on an individual. A mentoring relationship can be built on any need an individual might have, whether it be socialization or school work, aggression or shyness, a mentoring relationship can help an individual become exposed to another perspective of how they can act or handle a variety of situations they might be presented with.

Conclusion

Mentoring has positive effects on those that participate. Within urban schools, minority students do not always have the knowledge or skills necessary to effectively navigate the educational system. Through a mentoring relationship, the mentor is able to provide the low performing students with the knowledge necessary to be effective within their environment and build a positive disposition towards education (Kelly & Daniels, 1997). My goal was to develop and implement a process through which students will expose one another to the resources and skills necessary to be successful within an educational environment, ultimately effecting academic and social proficiency. To that

end, my next chapter will describe the literature I used concerning mentoring, minority

student populations, and urban school settings. Chapter III will identify the

methodologies I used within my action research. I believe that it is important for the

reader to clearly understand the process I had taken and how this process affected the

students with whom I was working. In Chapters IV, V, VI, and VII, I will discuss my

cycles and describe the process and analysis of each. In Chapter VIII I will address my

leadership within the context of this action research project and recommendations for

the future.

The leadership approach that I identify with is servant and transformational. I

believe in helping others first and worrying about myself after that, this is something that

makes me believe that I am a servant leader. As a transformational leader I believe that I

am always trying to learn while teaching others simultaneously. It is my hope that I have

truly helped the students I had identified through what they were able to accomplish. I

believe that this project has strengthened and challenged my leadership because I find

that I continually had to compromise the idealistic project I had envisioned for reality.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

A mentor is someone who is seen as an expert within a specific area and is able to provide the mentee with information which will hopefully guide him or her to successful outcomes. Mentoring relationships are many times transformational, resulting in the mentor and the mentee learning from one another and producing beneficial outcome for both parties. The definition and process of mentoring is no longer commonplace, something intuitive, but rather something that has been contrived by institutions wanting to multiply the results of others who have seen success because of a mentor. This is all completed in an effort to achieve optimal results from employees or individuals.

A mentoring relationship is something that is evident in classrooms and within communities across our country between students and faculty. These relationships provide students with someone to talk to about school and personal issues they might be facing, ultimately allowing the mentee to perform better academically and socially (Greenwood, 2008; Meehan et al., 2003; Munoz, 2004; Payne, 1994; Wallace et al., 2000). Although every student is not fortunate enough to have a formal mentoring relationship with a faculty member, there is no difference between the relationship a student has with someone classified as a mentor and a positive relationship the student can have with someone who they see as a role model.

The concept of mentoring has been taken further in many urban school districts through the implementation of preventative programming and various school reforms. School reform is the process of completely changing the school program in an effort to

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positively affect the whole student population (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Carswell et al., 2009; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2007). School reform is seen as a preventative measure for many urban districts in an effort to positively affect student grades and behaviors on a greater scale. The preventative programs target those students who are at high-risk for failing because of the system in place (Carswell et al., 2009). Whether it is school reform or preventative programming, the ultimate goal is student achievement, academically and socially. One form of preventative programming is mentoring, offering students a role model they can turn to for guidance or advice.

This literature review is very important because of the positive effects one individual can have on another individual simply by listening to him or her and giving advice. As an educator and someone who enjoys helping other people I have had many opportunities to be mentored as well as to mentor others. Each mentoring relationship is unique in its own way, and in some situations a mentoring relationship is not effective because of differences between the mentor and mentee. When developing a mentoring relationship both parties need to be willing to be open to the relationship and the views of the other individual. I attribute my successes to the relationships I have built with faculty and staff throughout my schooling career. Personally, I have always taken more from a mentoring situation when it was not intentional and I simply looked up to the individual because of our commonalities and the knowledge he or she has to offer me. The issue that I have always found with formal mentoring relationships is that everything is scheduled and the placement is made because the mentor has offered to help and the mentee has been identified as needing help. The goal of my research is to look at the individual

student and develop the pieces necessary for a mentoring relationship to be successful within a school setting.

A mentor is someone who is there for the mentee to listen and offer sound advice to the issues or topics addressed during their meeting. The role and responsibilities of a mentor vary based on the purpose of the relationship. As an educator I am continually trying to work with my students as an informal mentor, realizing that I cannot expect them to produce their best work and challenge themselves academically when they are facing more challenging issues outside of my classroom. Even though I might not be able to tell these students exactly what they need to do, having very different experiences, I am able to be there for them as someone who will listen. Together we can come up with different ways they can address the situation, looking at the various outcomes from each scenario. It is important for mentors to establish themselves as someone who will listen and be there for help. It is also the mentors' responsibility to ensure the safety of the mentee and others and that the information they tell the mentor cannot be kept a secret if it could possibly hurt them or others (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Sax et al., 2005). I have always found that sharing my personal experiences with my students through the lessons I teach in the classroom allows them to feel more comfortable in opening up with me. As a formal and informal mentor, an individual others come to with problems, it is also my responsibility to be knowledgeable of the resources that are available to them within our school and community. Within my school I will usually refer students to our guidance counselor, social worker, or substance abuse counselor. These are all individuals who can discuss issues at greater length and offer more suggestions for students.

There are various types of mentoring, from formal mentoring relationships usually found within the educational or work setting, to informal mentoring relationship in which one person decides to help another simply because they want to see the person succeed (Greenwood, 2008; Meehan et al., 2003; Munoz, 2004; Payne, 1994; Wallace et al., 2000). The literature surrounding mentoring or relationships between students and teacher shows the importance of these relationships and the positive effects it has on behaviors, academics, and retention. This literature review demonstrates the effects a mentoring relationship, whether formal or informal, can have on individuals at all ages. Additionally the literature details the characteristics students look for in mentors, and explains the possible criteria organizations use when matching individuals they believe will benefit from a formal mentoring experience.

Elementary Mentoring Relationships

At a very early age mentoring relationships begin with students and their teachers. These relationships are based primarily on trust and expectations. The student needs to be able to trust the teacher and the teacher earns this trust by setting expectations for the students. This early relationship sets behavioral patterns for students in terms of the expectations that will be set for them throughout their schooling career (Howes, 2000; Kelly & Daniels, 1997; Meehan et al., 2003). An exorbitant amount of time is spent on working with students on their behaviors and behavioral norms within the classroom. These expectations are difficult for teachers to establish, since every child learns at different levels and are coming into the classroom with varying levels of experience (Howes, 2000; Meehan et al., 2003).

A major component that assists students in their transition to pre-school is the socialization skills that children possess when entering school. When students come into a pre-school environment with no prior socialization, it is the teacher's responsibility to communicate and model for the student the norms of the classroom (Howes, 2000; Kelly & Daniels, 1997). Within a pre-school classroom, sharing is seen as a norm in order to fit in with the environment expected by the teachers within the classroom. In order for students to develop these behaviors it first has to be modeled for students by an adult they trust and the child must then demonstrate the skill (Howes, 2000). In order for this to happen at the pre-school level the child must trust and find value in the personal attention from the teacher. If the child does not learn the skill of sharing, these situations will many times turn into aggressive behaviors on the part of the unsocial student, requiring the implementation of greater interventions (Meehan et al., 2003).

An intervention of removing an aggressive child from the general classroom population is a solution for many school districts. This allows the aggressive child to receive more one on one attention from the teacher, who is usually more qualified to deal with defiant behaviors (Meehan et al., 2003). Students who do not work well with other students need to be able to develop trusting relationships with the teachers. The negative behaviors will not change immediately, but the ultimate goal is that these students will be placed back with the general student population. In a majority of the cases a root cause of this problem stemmed back to the parents, causing the teacher to not just work with the student but to also work with the parents in ensuring the positive behaviors taught in school are reinforced within the home (Meehan et al., 2003).

Students are always looking for the approval of those they see as role models, and for eight hours a day, Monday through Friday, those role models are their teachers. The way in which a teacher provides approval to a student can greatly affect the achievement a student receives on a project and future assignments (Kelly & Daniels, 1997). Something that every teacher is guilty of is praising students too often, continually telling them that they are doing a great job. This can affect the effort that students place on future assignments, knowing that their work is always great. A better method teachers can use, to show students their approval, is through encouraging words. Rather than telling them how great the entire assignment is, let them know a specific part that stands out. Students were shown a video of a teacher who used encouraging words with students and then a second part where she used praising words. When students were asked to rate this teacher, the majority of the students rated the teacher using encouragement higher in terms of trust and attributes (Kelly & Daniels, 1997). Through teaching socialization skills and choosing the words we use with our students carefully at an early age, teachers are able to form trusting student-teacher relationships. Exposing students to these types of relationships will help them as they grow older in forming these bonds with others. Although every student is not receptive to this type of relationship, it is important to provide them with the expectations and norms of being a student in the school environment (Meehan et al., 2003). These expectations of right from wrong are very consistent from classroom to classroom, regardless of the teacher. What is different in each classroom is the level of care teachers demonstrate and show toward their students based on the teachers' experiences and beliefs. Caring is not something that is taught and the act of caring for someone looks very different to each person.

Many economically disadvantaged students come into school not having the same background knowledge as their more affluent peers (Brown & Low, 2008; Schacter & Jo, 2005). These students usually take longer when learning new concepts such as reading. If a student is not ready to progress many students would be sent to summer school. When economically disadvantaged students were sent to a summer day camp, encompassing reading as a part of the day, students showed improvement in reading comprehension. This research shows that economically disadvantaged students can show improvement over the summer just as their middle and high income counterparts through a different program format (Schacter & Jo, 2005). In this example students were offered the support of adults in the areas of reading, providing the students with more self confidence and ability when it came to their proficiency in this area.

Economically disadvantaged students can be successful when they attend schools that consist of clear purpose, high performance standards, shared leadership, community support, and talented hardworking teachers who are not willing to accept failure as an option. When certain aspects of this are missing, economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be vulnerable to failure (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998)

Literature surrounding mentoring relationships focuses on higher education and supplying economically disadvantaged or novice students with additional support in an effort to provide students with opportunities in attaining academic success within the university (Antonoio, 2004; Colvin, 2007; Good et al., 2000). The way in which students are assigned mentors might vary, but the purpose for mentoring is the same in providing students with academic and social norms. The dynamic of mentoring relationships have been instrumental in assisting students when adjusting to new environments while

meeting the academic and social expectations necessary for them to be successful

(Deutsch & Spencer, 2009).

Developmental Transitions

Student transition between elementary, middle, and high school can be difficult

for many students. The research highlights the difficulties for African American students;

especially those labeled as high risk are vulnerable during this transition (Burchinal,

Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008; Gentile-Genitty, 2009). This is usually followed by a

decrease in academic grades and ultimately additional stress is placed on the student and

their family (Burchinal et al., 2008). Students who are susceptible to social risk found

themselves receiving lower scores in math and externalizing the problems they

were encountering. When parents are involved in the educational process, along with less

racial discrimination, African American students are able to perform at high academic

levels.

Gentile-Genitty (2009) looks at various programs to see which program best suits

the needs of the students during these hard times of transitioning from one school to

another. During middle school and high school, students need more personalized

attention, yet their classes get larger and their teachers change based on content. The

research found that programming for students needs to involve teachers, parents, peers,

the individuals, and changes within the school community. In order for students to

experience a smooth transition it is important for the program to be culturally sensitive

and include problem solving and self esteem components to assist the students in

developing their skills. Many programs do not include all of the domains that affect the

whole student but usually only one or two of the necessary areas.

During time periods when students are transitioning between elementary, middle school, high school, and college they are developing an understanding for who they are, and through this process, students are supposed to be gaining a great understanding of right from wrong. Within economically disadvantaged settings, students do not always learn right from wrong and that is why violence prevention programs have been developed. Many of the actions students take prior have negative repercussions on the student and places an at-risk label on them for encountering violence. The purpose of violence prevention programs is to promote the effectiveness of nonviolent responses to problem situations (Farrell et al., 2008).

Secondary School Extracurricular Programming

When students enter middle school and high school they are no longer with one specific teacher for a majority of their day, in many cases causing a less personalized relationship with the teachers they have. In these settings, teachers cannot and many will not stop, their lessons to discuss issues that the class is facing. This can cause issues for many students who are unable to concentrate on the lesson being taught because of something that takes place in the hallway or during a non academic period. Many students try to test the expectations of their teachers and they are also going through many developmental changes during this time of their life. While students might not be receiving the attention they need in the classroom, a major influence for this student population is the many extracurricular activities offered within their middle and high school setting and also within the community. These activities are usually run by teachers or members of the community and allow students an opportunity to excel in a variety of sporting activities and clubs, while receiving mentoring from the individuals who are in

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charge of the programs. Extracurricular activities can influence students in a positive way, both socially and academically (Broh, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Greenwood, 2008; Shann, 2001). Extracurricular programs keep students in a safe environment after school hours and many times have a grade point average students must maintain in order to participate. When students do not meet the grade point average, the student will many times not be allowed to participate in the activities and be offered tutoring services through the program or a connected resource.

Students who participate in extracurricular programs form relationships with the students in the program and the individuals in charge of running the program. This provides the student with a number of individuals they can talk to about issues in a non-threatening, informal environment (Eccles & Templeton, 2002). These programs are many times connected with community agencies, providing many students with unofficial mentors that are able to come in and work with students on certain topics or issues that might be facing the community, such as drugs, alcohol, or gangs. Involvement in these programs also offers many opportunities to the students simply because they are involved and attend regularly, such as trips, guest speakers, and many times can allow them to be seen as a role model within their school and community (Broh, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002). When parents are involved, or take interest, in the extracurricular programming their students are a part of, these programs become even more effective. Although many of the programs are available to all middle and high school students the main target is always at-risk students in an effort to lessen their chances of getting into trouble and offer students incentives to be involved (Greenwood, 2008).

Student participation in extracurricular mentoring activities is important for students in continuing to create and develop social norms with their peers and the adults with whom they come in contact. These programs set an expectation for students to meet both socially and academically in order for them to continue their involvement with the program. These expectations can sometimes be the only guidelines students have to be successful, not being given any parameters within their home. Since many of these programs are offered through community based agencies, the programs are able to not only offer support for the students but also provide assistance for the families of the students. Barry et al. (2006) show that faith-based organizations have had a significant impact on a students' well being at all grade levels. It is shown that males are affected the most positively from faith-based programming. This type of program is seen as prevention for students when addressing the risk factors of accessibility to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, academic achievement, self concept, peer behavior, and interaction with parents (Barry et al., 2006). When issues from home can be addressed, students have better chances of being successful socially and academically. Family involvement and participation within these extracurricular programs show students the support they need to be successful (Broh, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Greenwood, 2008). Support that students receive from the individuals in charge of the extracurricular programs along with their peers can be enough to prevent them from getting involved with negative influences. This support can also be a motivation for them to do well academically and form future goals for themselves. Involvement in these types of programs for at-risk students can provide them with the support that many of them have never received at home (Greenwood, 2008).

Through student programming, students are receiving additional support from those individuals who are organizing the programs taking place. Within most of these programs, most students need to meet certain academic requirements in order to participate. When students are not academically proficient, most programs have various preventative measures in place to help the students. Those individuals running the programs many times act as mentors to the participating students, expecting positive behaviors academically and socially in order for the students to participate.

Interventions within Urban School Environments

Middle school and high school can be complicated enough regardless of the environment. Educators within urban school districts continually face the issue of how they can increase achievement among their students, and many school districts are at a loss for options when they are unable to provide their students with the best education. This is where many schools are forced to decide on how they can restructure their school in order to best fit the needs of their students being serviced. The research shows that given the right school environment and support, students can be successful academically and socially, regardless of their outside surroundings (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Carswell et al., 2009; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2007).

A variety of reform models have been developed to address the needs of high poverty urban middle schools. These models look at what they believe students need to be successful and through the support of the community provide student and their families with the necessary tools (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2007). The school reform models reviewed all encompass more academic time, extended school years, and parental or community support. Each of these areas allow for

students to be successful within their school environment, showing achievement academically and socially among their peers. A large part for each of the school reform models is creating an environment that is positive and conducive to learning.

Problem behaviors of many students are not encouraged within their school environments, but it is after school hours that students are faced with many choices that promote these challenging behaviors. Urban school districts and alternative education programs offer their students various opportunities to participate in after school activities. These activities are sometimes organized through the school or through community based programs. It is the goal of these programs that students will have an outlet to do what is right instead of being further exposed to problematic behaviors. As students learn to cope with the challenges they face within their communities, it is important for the family to not only be a part of the process but also be supportive (Carswell et al., 2009). Many issues from the surrounding community are eventually brought into the schools and can make it difficult for students to focus on academics when they are preoccupied by other concerns. Within the school setting it is necessary for students to have others they can rely on to find support and focus.

Hall (2006) discusses the need to work with African American and Latino youth within urban communities. Through the research, the differences between community based and school based mentoring are discussed. Although it was found that students benefit more from school based mentoring, it was because these relationships were found to be more consistent and reliable than those mentor matches made within the community. Those school mentoring programs must be aware of the time constraints that are placed on their matches since the research has also shown that any relationship that is

formed for less than six months can be more harmful to the student than beneficial (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005).

High School Mentoring and Relationships

Although high school teachers work with a large number of students, the perception that students receive from them, as to whether or not they care, reflects in the motivation and academic successes of the students (Payne, 1994; Thompson & Lewis, 2005; Towns et al., 2001). When choosing the path of education, teachers want to help students and see them be successful. Over the course of their career many teachers lose focus and get discouraged by the lack of motivation they see in their students. This lack of motivation is many times misread as the student not caring and an easy response for the teacher is to not care also, and to focus their attention on the students who the teachers believe want to succeed. In our society students are coming to school with more problems that they do not know how to handle themselves, and take their emotions out on unrelated topics, such as their school work. As an educator it is important to understand the need to address these situations in order for the student to be successful in the classroom. Teachers who are seen as "going the extra mile" find success with their students (Towns et al., 2001). Similar to that of a mentoring relationship, students were provided with the support necessary for them to be successful within their given environment.

Teachers find it easy to judge and grade others based on their assignments and performances in the classroom, but when it comes to getting judged by others it is a completely different story. A majority of teachers who work within urban school settings have the right intentions for working there, wanting to help the students, but many times

lose sight of the issues their students are bringing into the classroom with them, having never experienced these issues themselves (Payne, 1994; Towns et al., 2001). It is evident that teachers who are more open to self examination are more successful in their teaching practices and interactions with their students. These teachers might not be able to relate to exactly what their students are going through, but they are able to be sensitive to the needs of their students by offering them available resources within the school and community. In comparison with other teachers, successful teachers agonize over the students they failed to reach, placing the blame on themselves and not on the student (Payne, 1994). Students are extremely perceptive in being able to distinguish between teachers who care about them by forming relationships and getting to know the backgrounds of their students versus the teachers who are there to collect a paycheck.

When looking at test scores, most see it simply as numbers and demographics. What many do not see is the relationships that are built throughout a school year in order for a student or group of students to be successful on state standardized tests (Payne, 1994; Towns et al., 2001). What is interesting about state test scores is that many times the sub groups indicate students who are not performing up to grade level or fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) within their school districts. These sub groups usually consist of low socio-economic status students and minority students.

Nationally, African American students are not performing well on standardized tests and their race or SES is usually an easy target to which faculty and administrators point. Many teachers have done everything in their powers to see these students achieve, yet this does not explain the fact that many African American and low SES students are performing at high levels in other areas throughout our country (Towns et al., 2001).

When looking at the differences between the schools that were performing at high levels and the schools that were not meeting the same standard, a common theme became apparent. Towns et al. (2001) showed that teachers in schools where the African American and low SES students were performing well on the standardized tests kept reinforcing the fact that they had "gone the extra mile." The idea of "going the extra mile" is an example of teachers going beyond their responsibilities to see their students be successful. Unfortunately, this is not the case in every school, and sometimes union relationships are stronger than the relationships teachers have with their students. When successful teachers realize that their students do not understand the material, they review it with the class again or review with students individually rather than just moving forward (Payne, 1994; Towns et al., 2001). Teachers that see success with their students genuinely want to see them be successful, not because it is their job but simply because they care. This attitude and mentality of caring comes out within their classrooms and students are definitely able to tell the difference (Towns et al., 2001).

When students feel empowerment and support within their schools they are willing to take on challenges they might not have otherwise. An example of this can be seen in a case study of an African American male who felt there to be a need for more advanced math classes within his high school (Thompson & Lewis, 2005). Along with the assistance of his teachers he petitioned the board of education to address this need. In this process he was responsible for finding students who would be interested in taking the class. The interesting piece is that the students who showed an interest in taking the class were not seen as those students who would usually be chosen to take the course and complete it successfully. These students felt a sense of empowerment, being a part of

something that was bigger than themselves and that was being led by one of their own classmates. Although the student in this case study was fortunate to have a role model, many students do not have role models within an urban school setting. In this situation, although many of the students did not have a role model, the student who took it upon himself to petition the board of education for better, more advanced course offerings inadvertently became a role model to a number of his peers. When students of minority status cannot find empowerment from others, there is always a chance that they will find a positive driving force among themselves (Thompson & Lewis, 2005; Towns et al., 2001). The greatest part of this specific case study is the acknowledgement that a role model or a mentor does not have to have direct contact with the mentee in order to be an influence, but can be just as effective through his actions.

There are a number of alternative high schools for students who might not be getting their needs met within a general high school setting. An alternative high school is a place for students who have issues with behavior or truancy. This setting allows them to receive more one on one attention from the faculty and staff of the school and will ideally provide the student with an education that can help them make something of their futures. Another type of alternative high school is a vocational school. This is seen as an alternative since it offers different opportunities for students based on their needs and aspirations for graduation. In both situations these alternative schools deal with at-risk students in offering them an environment that will provide them with opportunities that address their needs and hopefully increase their retention rate within the school district through close relationships with faculty and staff. Faculty working in these environments need to be sensitive to the needs of their students and need to be trained to work with

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these students in a variety of ways that differ from the average teacher (Hayward &
Tallmadge, 1995; Munoz, 2004).

Vocational Students

When addressing the needs of vocational students, a number of things need to be
present in order for the vocational setting to be successful in preventing student drop out
and retention. A personal environment is something necessary for most students to be
successful (Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995). Working in small groups and knowing
individuals within the school environment can offer students a stability they might not
have at home. Something that all schools establish with their students is behavioral norms
and expectations. When students know the expectations set for them and the
consequences for challenging the expectations, infractions will be less likely to happen.
This is an important topic the teacher mentor addresses regularly with alternative school
students. One of the resources available to vocational students is a work placement
officer. This position might vary from school to school but it is the responsibility of this
individual to let students know about internships and job opportunities that are available.

Most vocational schools also offer their students certifications specific to their
areas of study through coursework they are taking. Within a vocational school
environment, it is important to offer students the academic support necessary for them to
be successful within the school and their placements. Teachers and staff members have to
be trained in how to deal with situations that might arise in their classroom along with
being knowledgeable of the resources available to the students within the school and
community. Although teachers and staff members of a vocational school might be seen as
mentors or role models to the students, it is important to have programs within the

vocational school offering the student mentors within their field of interest. This type of opportunity will give the student first-hand experience of what to expect from working in that field (Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995).

Many students end up at an alternative school because their school does not know how to deal with the students' personal situations. The purpose of an alternative school is to send the student there, correct the behavior, and return the student to their home high school (Munoz, 2004). Unfortunately, many of the students who end up going to alternative high school do not perform well academically, do not graduate, and they never return to their home school. The fact that the students do not care about academics and are usually too occupied with other issues surrounding their life, they end up not receiving the education they need to be successful and contributing members of society. Teachers within alternative schools are not able to teach their lessons without addressing the issues their students are bringing with them to the classroom (Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Munoz, 2004). A majority of the students' time in school is spent out of the classroom in counseling trying to address the issues they are having. Students within an alternative school setting receive the support they need to be successful, but are not receiving the complete academic program as their peers at their home high schools.

Alternative high schools and vocational staff members are trained to deal with at risk students, academically and socially. These individuals are aware of the students' needs and need to be sensitive when addressing them, realizing that most students cannot move forward until they have put their issues behind them. Although many students end up dropping out of alternative schools it is important to offer these students as much support as possible, in the form of mentoring, in an effort to see them be successful and

graduate with a skill that will allow them to get a job that produces a living income

(Hayward & Tallmadge, 1995; Munoz, 2004).

Within the alternative school setting the students are provided with an

environment that is conducive to learning and allows them to learn skills in which they

are interested. Students who participate in an alternative school setting are provided with

quasi mentors who develop their lessons and the school environment around the needs of

the selected students. The reason why alternative schooling works, is students are able to

relate to the staff members and their expertise within certain areas.

College Mentoring Relationships

When entering a college environment, relationships between faculty or upper

classmen and incoming freshmen are based on similarities. These similarities can be

based on gender, race, or interests (Guiffrida, 2005; Lee, 1999; Sax et al., 2005).

Mentoring relationships at the college level are many times formal mentoring experiences

for low SES students to ensure that their experiences at college will be positive and

successful (Salinitri, 2005; Wallace et al., 2000). In any of these relationships, formal or

informal, it is important that the mentor is open to having a mentee and that the mentee is

open to taking advice from the mentor. When students were provided with a survey it

revealed that the difference between male and female students' relationships with their

mentors was that females felt as though they were able to build more positive

relationships with their mentors than the male students surveyed (Sax et al., 2005). In

addition to gender, race also shapes mentoring relationships. Minority students at a

predominantly White institution felt that they had more supportive associations with

Black faculty members, explaining that they saw them as going above and beyond the

expectations of a mentor (Guiffrida, 2005). Within a predominantly White institution, students were asked about their feelings towards receiving a faculty mentor. The students surveyed were excited about the idea of getting a faculty mentor. When they were asked if race mattered, students voiced their concerns about getting a faculty mentor in the same field versus a mentor of the same race (Lee, 1999). Although the results of the surveys focus on the variations of race, it is important to take into account the varying demographics on each college campus. When a student does not feel the support and commonalities of their peers, their needs for a mentor change based on their feeling of what is necessary for them to be successful within their surrounding environment.

When students enter college and begin a mentoring relationship, no one sets expectations for the mentor or the mentee, but it is rather assumed that the mentor knows what he is doing and that the mentee will listen. There are varying perceptions of what the mentor is looking to accomplish in his capacity and what the mentee is looking to get out of the relationship with the mentor (Allen & Smith, 2008). The mentor will many times focus primarily on academic concerns and advisement, where the student needs more information on "how things work" within the campus setting. Allen and Smith (2008) suggest a co-advising model between the academic advisor and student affairs professionals. When surveyed, it was seen that both the students and the faculty valued the mentoring relationship but the students felt more support should be provided. These varying perceptions can result in a feeling of disappointment from the mentoring relationship. Faculty and students place different priorities on the needs of students. One of the major issues with an arranged mentoring relationship is the fact there is not enough information provided to the mentor addressing the information that should be discussed

with his or her mentee (Allen & Smith, 2008). Formal mentoring often consists of prearranged meetings with a purpose to each meeting. Although a mentor is assigned to a student, in formal mentoring arrangements many students do not feel they have the type of relationship where they can simply stop by their mentor's office to say, "Hello," or ask a question. Students have reported missing the informal conversations and relationships when engaged in a formal mentoring arrangement (Wallace et al., 2000). The purpose of the formal mentoring arrangements on many campuses is to offer support and encourage student retention. That being said, students feel as though there needs to be an informal aspect to the mentoring process to truly build a mentoring relationship.

While many faculty members believe they have formal or informal mentoring relationships with their students, a majority of these students do not feel the same way (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). In one study, only one student out of close to 24 surveyed met the criteria of having an actual mentoring relationship, while the faculty involved stated that they had mentoring relationships with their students. Clearly it is important for students to have interaction with faculty outside of the classroom because of the connection between such interaction and student satisfaction with the school and overall achievement.

When working with low SES students it is important for faculty to provide these students with constructive criticism, addressing the problems they see in their work earlier rather than later in the semester (Cole, 2008). The process of providing constructive criticism is dynamic in building strong faculty-student relationships. These conversations over work can increase students' overall satisfaction with the institution along with their academic performance in classes. Although the feedback might not

always be positive, students see this feedback as the faculty member caring enough and wanting to see the student succeed (Cole, 2008). These faculty student conferences are a form of an informal mentorship since the faculty member is taking the time to see the students be successful academically. These types of meetings will many times turn into formal mentoring relationships once the class has ended.

Not every student is the same, and similarly mentoring relationships are not the same. Each relationship is unique based on the individuals involved and what each party is looking to get out of the relationship. Although a majority of the research describes the mentoring needs of low SES minority population, not every student who falls into this category has the same needs. One East Coast University compared the difference between high and low SES honors students. The major difference between the two sets of honor students was the fact that they came into their college experience with a different set of personal values and experience than their high SES counterparts (Griffin, 2006). When looking at the students who took part in this survey it is evident that their motivation to accelerate is both internal and external allowing them to achieve the high performances that they have been able to. This case study allows us to see the success that students are able to earn prior to their experiences at college through the individuals that motivated them to be the students they are today.

College mentors can be anyone a student believes he or she can learn from. These mentors can be faculty, classmates, or even people from their hometowns. It is important to have someone to look up to because it keeps students focused on what their goal for being at college really is. Establishing a mentor while in college is important because for many students college is the first time that they are away from home and it is a time

when they do not have anyone telling them what they have to do. Although many mentors come and go out of the lives of the students they have touched, the lessons they have learned from them will stay forever. These lessons that they have learned over the years have developed them into the individuals many aspire to become, forever changing as they continually meet and learn from different people (Cole, 2008; Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Griffin, 2006). The research has shown there to be validity with both formal and informal mentoring and the positive effects each has on students as they make decisions that will shape their adulthood.

Conclusion

According to Payne (1994), successful educators agonize over students they have failed to reach. It is the responsibility of educators to meet the needs of our students and discover the various ways we can assist them in achieving their full potential. Within this literature review the findings cover the various developmental ages of a student and the way in which children are able to form mentoring relationships with their teachers and other adults throughout their life. At a very young age, children are relying on others to model for them the ways in which they are expected to act around other children and with adults. As students enter middle school they no longer have the individual attention they once had in elementary school and many rely on extracurricular activities provided by the school or within the community for guidance and support socially and academically. The literature suggests that as students enter high school they become more independent, making decisions based on the guidance and support they have been given up to this point. This is a true time for students to define who they are and decide where they want to take their lives.

As students enter college, faculty members become pivotal components of a student's social and academic life. The literature addresses the need for faculty to be involved in the development of a student not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom. The effects of having a faculty member involved in and out of the classroom will not only assist students socially but also academically. When students leave the K-12 environment they go from wanting mentors who have the same interests as them socially to wanting mentors who have the same fields as them. Mentors who have the same field as their mentees can help them academically and also in terms of networking and job prospects. The research shows that the only time race plays a role in choosing a mentor is when the demographic of an institution is greatly uneven. When this is the situation, students want to be able to have a mentor they feel they have something in common with (Guiffrida, 2005). Once students enter college they are no longer driven by the environment that might have once pushed their spirits down, but they are driven by the possibilities that their futures hold. A mentor or role model is someone who can assist them in staying focused on their goals and remind them of the reasons they are in college when times become hard.

Along with various names, mentors come in many shapes and sizes. The purpose of having a mentor is to have someone students know they can turn to when problems arise or you simply need to vent about a situation. Mentors can be of great assistance in learning how to do something new or filling out letters of recommendation. A mentor does not have to be someone the mentee knows personally prior, but can be someone he or she knows they can rely on when assistance is needed. As Towns et al. (2001)

point out, a mentor should be someone who is willing to go the extra mile to see their

mentee succeed.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

Every state has a means for assessing students, based on what students are expected to know by a specific grade level. The results of these tests identify students who have not attained mastery of skills within the areas of language arts literacy, mathematics, and science. Urban schools that have seen success many times have had to implement a complete school reform, focusing on an extended school day, school year, and even attendance on weekends, allowing students to have more instructional time (Ross et al., 2007). This supports the research that when students are not in school, they are not taking part in extra-curricular activities offered by the school and community (Shann, 2001). Within the identified urban school of this study, Wayside Middle School, there was a group of students who were not meeting the proficiency standards identified by the New Jersey Department of Education, and measured by the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). The data were analyzed and broken down by subgroup to identify levels of proficiency. It was found that economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, and students with disabilities had continually, year after year, not met proficiency. Urban school districts do not always know what to do with these students or how to bring them up to the levels of achievement that the state expects each individual student to attain. I have always felt that mentoring and exposing students and parents to resources and services that they were unaware were available or never took advantage, could have positive effects on students and their families, both academically and socially. Benson and Martin (2003) discuss the

importance of inviting parents and families into the school, ultimately causing student success. Within their research they found that the more involved the families were with school, the more students accepted the school setting as a part of their family culture, rather than something to which they were unable to relate.

This chapter identifies the actions taken when peer mentoring groups were implemented at Wayside Middle School. I looked at the perceptions that low performing economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, and students with disabilities held towards school, and how a peer mentoring group affected their social and academic standing. When addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students, Duncan and Magnuson (2002) found in their research that by boosting a family's income they were having a direct effect on a student's readiness level for school. Similarly, in the peer mentoring group the students are not receiving something tangible but rather building and developing positive relationships to assist them in becoming successful within the school setting. Through qualitative and quantitative measures, data were collected to identify the various processes necessary for low performing students to be successful, socially and academically, within an educational setting.

The purpose of this research was to answer the following questions that will identify a process, which positively affects economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, and students with disabilities within a peer mentoring program.

1. What perceptions did low performing students at Wayside Middle School hold towards school?

2. How did peer mentoring impact the social issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

3. How did peer mentoring impact the academic issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

4. What influence did students have on their peers when working in a mentoring capacity?

5. How did my leadership theory affect the relationships between teachers and the identified low performing students at Wayside Middle School?

First, I looked at the perceptions low performing students held towards school, and what relationship, if any, the family's perception of schooling influenced the student. Through the implementation of a peer mentoring group I was hoping to identify the academic and social improvements shown by the involved students over the course of one school year. It was my hope that students learned how to assist one another and themselves through their everyday challenges and realize their own power with regards to helping their peers while being a part of a peer mentoring group. In the end I reflected on how my own leadership had changed and developed through this process.

Mentoring has positive effects on low performing students within urban areas and across various educational levels, but research also discusses the issues within mentoring relationships such as logistics, commonalities, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational level, causing there to be varying perspectives and expectations from each person entering into this type of relationship (Allen & Smith, 2008; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Lee, 1999; Sax et al., 2005; & Wallace et al., 2000). Although there is research focused on mentoring, the research concerning mentoring within the elementary and middle school setting is limited.

The identified student population within Wayside Middle School had been labeled as below proficient through state testing. These students were further labeled by administration, teachers, staff, and outside educational providers in reports and school initiatives, in an effort to implement positive change within the school and district. Many low performing urban school districts have taken extreme measures to bring about positive change through implementation of various whole school reform models (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Munoz et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2007). The purpose of this study was to identify the low performing students, as indicated through NJ ASK, and over the course of 2009-2010 school year, move the identified students from not proficient on the state test to proficiency, based on their social and academic needs. In addition to the state test, I also measured their transition to middle school through report card grades and discipline records. This action research project did not simply focus on raising student test scores, but also looked at the students' self esteem and socialization, and, hopefully, affected their overall perceptions towards school positively. It was my hope that through this action research, students developed a more positive outlook towards school, which was measured through the pre and post surveys administered in October and May. Other sources of data used were formal and informal observations, academic grades, and discipline referrals.

Research Design

As I approached this research project, I knew that it was necessary for me to address the needs of the identified subgroups within the school: economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, African American, and Hispanic. I came into this project having been a mentor and being mentored by others, understanding the power

that can come from such a relationship. When deciding that I wanted to focus on mentoring, I knew that I also wanted to affect the most number of students possible, which is why I selected to conduct a peer mentoring process. Throughout the creation of this process I realized the connection with action research, since through this process I would be reflecting and modifying the practice as necessary.

Action research is a cyclical form of research where one self-reflects on action being done to encourage improvement through action within an educational setting (Mills, 2000). In order for action research to be effective the researcher must assess the environment being addressed, identify the problem, and act based on research collected in an effort to achieve a positive outcome. Through each cycle the researcher must reflect on the research and decide where he must go in order for the action research to be effective. Once the action of the study is reflected on by the researcher, the research must then revise the research accordingly.

This action research looked at the effects of peer mentoring groups on low performing students, both academically and socially. Action research is described as a way of looking at what is happening within an educational setting and implementing various changes to make it more effective (Glickman, 1995). As I attempted to implement this action research within the context of an educational setting, I also looked at how my leadership affected others and how I had developed and changed as a leader through the process.

Action researchers generally use a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003), collecting both qualitative and quantitative data together in order to strengthen the research. I collected test score data, academic reports, and behavioral records to identify

the students who would participate in the study. Pre surveys and post surveys were given to students in order to establish a baseline for creating a measurement, which allowed me to identify the progress of the participating students over a period of time. Throughout the year, qualitative data were collected during the peer mentoring group sessions using observations based on the dialogue that took place. Semi-structured interviews, measuring the perception of school and mentoring, were administered to staff members within the school.

Within this action research I was the researcher and facilitator. It was my goal that this would turn into a second order change, restructuring the norms within Wayside Middle School and establishing new priorities (Argyris & Schön, 1974). At the time of the action research project I was a sixth grade language arts teacher where the study was taking place. Each of the students participating in the research was a student within one of my three language arts classes. I built relationships with these students, some of their parents, and various members of the school staff and community. As a researcher and school employee, I shared the information I found with my school and district administration.

Data Collection Strategies

Data were collected through various qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative method used within this study was the analysis of numeric data (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative methods utilized were field notes, student survey (Appendix A), observations, staff interviews (Appendix B), and a staff survey (Appendix C). I believe that this approach provided me with the most valuable information concerning mentoring within the context of the environment I was conducting the research. When implementing

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the peer mentoring groups various areas of data were collected such as: academic grades, disciplinary files, and state test scores. In addition to the pre and post student survey which I administered to the students once they received consent to participate (Appendix D), this information assisted me in measuring the growth of each participant, and also set a baseline for the students of whom I collected data. Through the observations, I looked for dialogue the students had with me or their peers that highlight either their perceptions of school, themselves, or ability to understand and explain right from wrong. I also observed the students in terms of how they interacted with their peers, whether this was in my classroom, the cafeteria, or other classes to see what behaviors were evident and what interventions, such as counseling, tutoring, sports, or theater would be needed. I wanted to identify what types of confidence students had demonstrated and how this affected them academically and socially. Through these observations I looked at the patterns and changes in each student as the school year progressed and what influences others might have on each individual student. I also kept observational notes during any parent meeting that was held with the students who were a part of the peer mentoring group. The observational protocol that I followed was highlighting words and phrases that addressed any recurring themes within the research (Creswell, 2003). The purpose of this was to see if there was any pattern between the parent and the student when discussing education or values held towards education.

I used my personal reflection journal regularly to document my thought process throughout the course of this action research and how I had developed or changed as a leader. I documented my views on the various steps I was taking for this project and where I believed I needed to make changes or improvements. I believe that self reflection

was an essential component through this process in order for this action research to be effective and worthy of use in future years by other staff members working with students. The interviews, surveys, and observations focused on the perceptions of students towards education, the influence others had on each student's behaviors, and what effects peer mentoring and relationships had on each student academically and socially when conducted in a school setting. As I used these data to answer my research questions, it was my hope that additional information and ideas would unfold through the process.

The information collected throughout the course of this project was all kept confidential. A majority of the information I collected could only be accessed through protected user names and passwords; this student information had been provided to me by the district for the purpose of this study. When discussing students in observations or through any interviews, the students are referred to by names they gave themselves, to ensure that their identity was not revealed. I also did not include certain identifying characteristics of the students, in an effort to ensure they could not be identified. When conducting interviews of staff or parents, the same is true in that a pseudonym was used for each of these individuals.

<div align="center">**Context**</div>

The site of this study, Wayside Middle School, was an urban middle school located in southern New Jersey. The school district housed a total of 19 schools, four of which were middle schools. The students that I worked with came to this middle school from one of our seven elementary schools. Over the past six years, Wayside Middle School had been labeled, by the state, as a School In Need of Improvement (SINI) and the student population I worked with had been identified by the state as non proficient in

language arts or mathematics. The students were further identified by one or more of the following sub groups: economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, or special education. The test scores I used came from the 2009 administration of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK).

Each middle school housed three small learning communities, a secondary schools initiative, in an effort to bridge the gap between school and home. Each small learning community was made up of students in grades 6, 7, and 8, along with content specific teachers from each academic area. The purpose of the small learning community model was to provide students with a more personalized educational experience, exposing the student to the same educators for their three years in middle school allowing them to build relationships. Students remain in their small learning community for the entire time that they are in the school, simply switching teachers based on grade level and subject. This study took place in only one of the small learning communities and focused on the low performing sixth grade students within this community.

This study began at the end of the 2009 school year and continued through the summer, collecting data and organizing the necessary information to move forward with the research. The peer mentoring groups began towards the end of September 2009 and ended during the last week in May 2010. Data were collected throughout the school year and during the summer months and the process was reorganized for September 2010.

The 10 students that I worked with were sixth graders, six boys and four girls, who had been identified within one of the school's partially proficient sub groups. These students had either fallen below the 200 proficiency mark in language arts or mathematics. In addition to falling below the 200 proficiency, these students were also

identified by the state as economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, or special education. The state received the demographical information about the students from the school district, and the school district received the demographical information regarding the student at the time they were officially registered with the school district.

The information that was used to identify students was from the 2009 fifth grade NJ ASK; this was information that we received from one of seven elementary schools that sent students to our middle school. I first identified the sixth grade students who would be a part of my small learning community, I reduced this number to the students who received a score of 200 or below in language arts or mathematics, and I then reduced the number further by identifying students who did not achieve academically   or might have had disciplinary issues during the 2008 – 2009 school year. The reason I only used students from my own small learning community was due to time constraints and scheduling.

Overview of Cycles

The peer mentoring groups were implemented within an environment that a need for an intervention had been identified. I had decided to use a peer mentoring setting to accomplish this because, as the researcher, I felt as though this would be a good way to assist more students at one time and the research I found did not identify much information concerning peer mentoring at any educational level. I chose this approach because of the convenience to implement the study within the context of the environment and least amount of intrusion for the school and district.

Cycle I – Data Collection and Recruitment

In the first cycle, which took place during August 2009 and concluded towards the middle of September 2009, students were identified through the 08-09 NJ ASK score results. I first removed any student who had received a 200 or above on both the language arts and mathematics section of the test. Using the students I had left I then removed any student who was not identified as economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, or special education. The students that remained were then narrowed down even further to the sixth grade students that were in the one small learning community participating. In addition to the state test scores, I also reviewed each of the student's academic grades and discipline referrals from the previous year. This allowed me to identify which students had been labeled as at-risk, not only by the state, but also by their elementary schools.

Once the school year began, I spoke with the students directly, explained my situation as a graduate student and educator, and found out from them if they were interested in assisting me with this research. I then sent home documentation (Appendix D) outlining the research project, providing their guardians with all necessary contact information, and requesting their permission for participation. During this process it was important that I received parental permission and I began to develop relationships with some of the parents whose students were participating.

Cycle II – Development and Implementation of the Peer Mentoring Process

In the second cycle, which took place between October 2009 and December 2009, the peer mentoring group began to meet, focused primarily on academics. It was a peer mentoring group because it consisted of low performing sixth grade students helping

other low performing sixth grade students. During this time, I met with the students twice a week during their 20 minute study hall periods. On the select days we would sometimes continue our meetings during their 20 minute lunch period. This added up to exactly 40 to 80 minutes per week that the low performing students were taking part in various group activities. This time provided the students with an opportunity to share their thoughts with the other students, and they were able to see what advice their peers could offer.

At the very beginning of this process, students took a survey (Appendix A) that asked them various questions concerning their perceptions and personal feelings of school and social behaviors. This gave me an initial gauge for what perceptions the students held at the beginning of the process. This cycle allowed me to work with the students as a group and establish the group parameters along with the expectations for how we planned on working together. This was the time where it was important for me to explain the reasons why it was important for each of us to trust one another and feel comfortable enough to speak openly when we met. Trust was established by setting up ground rules and expectations for what was expected during our sessions. During the second cycle it was important that the students realized that I was still a teacher and it was my primary responsibility to ensure the safety of them and other students. I further explained that if I heard that they or someone they knew was in danger, it was my responsibility and job to report it.

At the end of December 2009, I evaluated how the students were doing through academic and behavior reports, in addition to informal conversations about how they believed they had adjusted to middle school. At this time I realized through the students grades and behaviors that their social interactions had more of a direct relation to their

grades than their grades have on their social dynamics. Understanding this, and taking into consideration the student's perspective, between January and May 2010 we focused our meetings primarily on social issues and only discussed academic concerns as they presented themselves or felt it was necessary to discuss.

Beginning in May 2010, I reflected on the year with the students involved in the peer mentoring and focused on the positives and negative experiences of their middle school experience. Through these conversations students developed their own protocol for helping each other. The purpose for this was to encourage the students to act as facilitators and mentors to incoming sixth grade students who were in the same position, academically and behaviorally, that they were at the beginning of the year.

Cycle III – Perceptions of Students, Staff, and Parents

The purpose of Cycle III, which began in November 2009, was to compare the perceptions of the participating students to the perceptions of the staff members and parents. The staff members took part in a semi-structured interview concerning beliefs towards education and mentoring. The parents were more difficult to get a hold of, so observations and field notes were used based on parent meetings and other functions through which I was able to interact with the parents of the participating students.

Throughout the course of Cycle III, I continued working with the students on a regular basis. The needs of the students were determined from week to week, as seen through the group meeting and one on one conversation that took place between the students and me. As the facilitator of the group meetings, I also shared the student concerns with their individual teachers to ensure that their needs academically were being

met. I documented these conversations through weekly journals and the observations I recorded weekly.

Through the staff interviews and parent meetings, I gained a better understanding of why the students were not always able to perform well academically and socially. The varied expectations made it difficult for most of the participating students to navigate the educational system; they were entrenched and did not fit the mold. Through Cycle III, additional insight was gained and that information was used to assist the students in creating various strategies to navigate a system they did not understand.

As parents came in for school events or scheduled meetings, I paid close attention to see if there was any direct correlation between the disposition of their parents to the outlook and beliefs of the student. I believe that the notes I took during parent meetings and whether or not the parents actually attended school functions provided me with a lot of information in regards to the parents' outlook on the importance of their involvement in school activities. I believe that the parents' disposition on education has a direct correlation on their student's outlook on schooling.

Cycle IV – Post Survey Administration and Analysis

During Cycle IV, the focus of the conversation changed from academic issues to social issues. This change in perspective began in January 2010 and lasted until the end of May 2010. The reason for making this change stemmed from reviewing the field notes based on the conversations the students were having during their peer mentoring group sessions. The students would begin talking about academics, but their conversation would always get moved to something socially relevant. I realized from this that a reason why

the students were not performing academically was because they were so preoccupied with social concerns that arose throughout the school day.

Students also took the same survey (Appendix A) that they had taken during Cycle I. The purpose of giving them the same survey again was to measure any growth or changes in their responses from the beginning to the end of the school year. I looked for changes in the students' perceptions towards schooling and whether or not these changes were positive, negative, or if no change was apparent at all. I then referred to the process I had taken through the peer mentoring group meetings to see how the implementation of this group had affected the student through this journey. Observations and field notes were used to measure the effectiveness of the peer mentoring groups.

Once school was over I began to review final academic grades to see how the students ended the school year. In August and September 2010, the NJ ASK test scores arrived and I was able to pull the test scores of the participating students to compare with their test scores from the previous year. This information allowed me to measure whether the peer mentoring groups played a larger role in the students live academically, socially, or both.

Data Analysis

As data were collected through surveys (Appendix A and Appendix C), observations, and field notes I looked for the various themes that emerged from the coding. Using these themes I coded and organized the information into categories within each theme. General themes that emerged from this research and data were self-awareness, influence of others, and behaviors. I classified each using different colors to assist me in organizing the data I collected. As new themes emerged, they were classified

accordingly with an assigned color. Once the themes had been identified within the writing, I assigned each to a specific category within the theme. These three themes encompass a number of categories to identify the specifics of various findings or recurring discussions. I believe that themes and categories emerged through recurrences within observations, interviews, and data that had been collected. This information was reviewed various times to ensure that data analysis was accurate and updated as the action research project progressed. Through data analysis, various cycles were altered based on the themes and categories that emerged through the observations, interviews, field notes, and surveys.

I established credibility by implementing the project within an environment in which I had developed relationships with students and staff members. Since various forms of qualitative data were going to be collected for this project, I relied heavily on the information I received from the students, and the amount of information I received heavily relied on the relationships that I developed with these students. I shared information regarding the research I collected and information I discovered with staff members to keep them informed of what I was working on and best practices in education for student achievement. As this action research project unfolded, along with the various processes that were implemented for each individual student, I was able to ensure reliability by thoroughly researching the literature available on mentoring and the methods used in the field. Although it was my hope that the same process could be easily implemented within another school, it was important that I realized and informed others that this process varies based on the school district, mentor/facilitator, and the students. Validity was assessed as information was gathered using multiple methods and it was

cross-referenced with other data and compared with the literature on the topic. The triangulation of these data from multiple sources validated the success and breakdown of the processes I implemented and the information I collected. Since I used a mixed methods approach, I compared the information and analysis I collected through the various processes.

Conclusion

It was my goal to provide students and school districts with various resources that could be implemented to achieve success academically. Through this research I was hoping to demonstrate the positive effects of peer mentoring on students and the achievement students could get through this self empowerment. The research identifies the positive social and academic effects that mentoring has on a student, but very little is available on the effects of peer mentoring. It was my goal to add to the literature in an area in which there is little information provided.

I had hoped that the data would show a direct correlation to student success, both academically and socially. This would cause the school to implement these processes with a larger group of students for the 2010-2011 school year. Although mentoring is encouraged within the district that the project is currently taking place, it is not consistently implemented or focused as a student intervention. I am hoping that the results of this action research project will encourage other staff members to be mentors to students within the school and assist these students in learning various strategies that will guide them to success.

As I analyzed the data I modified the cycles as it was necessary. Through these findings I notified the district and school administration of how I was planning to proceed with the project and recommended how mentoring should be implemented with other

student populations. Throughout this process I also consulted with various professors concerning the data I was collecting and asked for suggestions they had concerning how I should move forward with the project. I reviewed and analyzed the data I collected and was able apply what I found to my conceptual framework and the goals of the peer mentoring group.

Chapter IV

Cycle I – Data Analysis / Findings

(Spring / Summer 2009)

Introduction

Mentoring has shown that positive relationships with non-parental adults can be influential in the lives of youth (Baker & McGuire, 2005). These individual outcomes might vary from one person to another depending on experiences and where individual values lie. While mentoring is primarily seen in the capacity of experienced and inexperienced employees working together within the field, Wallace et al. (2000) found that many inexperienced employees felt as though there was too much structure within their mentoring relationship and not enough opportunities for them to discuss what was on their mind. Allen and Smith (2008) report that those involved within mentoring relationships find value in meeting with their mentor, but they also feel as though the conversations can be one sided, limiting the topics they are able to discuss with their mentor. One of the concerns that I have always had with mentoring relationships is the fact that they are very time sensitive, only lasting for the period of time that the student is in school or a specific program. In my experience, students who have been recommended for mentoring lack a social or academic capacity necessary for their success within the educational setting. Salinitri (2005) worked with students who were peer mentored during their first year in college, and followed them over a two year period through their transition into the college environment. Students who participated in Salinitri's research were very successful based on the commonalities the students shared with their peer mentors, in addition to the mentors' ability to relate.

During the CAPA Spring 2009 Benchmark meeting with representatives of the state and Wayside Middle School staff, a representative from the state asked what programs had been implemented to address the needs of our sub group populations who were not reaching proficiency on the state assessment. Although Wayside Middle School had implemented a number of programs, they were all offered to the entire student population and no program addressed the specific needs of the students who had been identified as needing the most support. It was this meeting that gave me the idea for starting the peer mentoring groups, focusing on those students who did not meet proficiency and were identified as falling within one of our sub group categories of African American, economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and special education. Having been involved with mentoring since high school, I knew that I wanted to start a program that would have a more long term effect, rather than the outcomes relying solely on the mentor. As a middle school teacher, I have always been amazed by the influence peer pressure has on students and through the peer mentoring groups this pressure could be used to attain positive outcomes. Over the course of the spring and summer 2009 I began to envision how I saw this program working. I reviewed individual student files and test scores, which indicated any sub group designation, and began identifying students to participate based on grades, test scores, and discipline referrals. Through the development of this action research project, it was my goal that students would be given an opportunity to express their feelings concerning education while realizing their ability to positively influence their peers.

A peer mentoring group would have to be organized in a way that the students could take ownership over how it functioned. Logistically, I was able to arrange for

students to meet twice a week. Creating a safe environment where students were able to trust those around them was something I realized would develop over time. I knew that I would have to provide topics for the students to discuss, but it was also my hope that the students would eventually lead their own discussions based on their experiences or issues they were facing. Although I am only in their lives for three years as a middle school teacher, they will have each other to rely on throughout the rest of their academic career. Through the development of a peer mentoring group, students learned to address peer pressure and school issues constructively.

> Those who choose to mentor believe in the influence of others and want to have that same effect on someone else. As a student I would go to my guidance counselor, who did not know me besides the two times I would see him each year for scheduling, engage me in a pre-planned conversation, and proceed to call himself my mentor, which he actually referred to himself for all of the students whose last names were between M and P. I would give him the answers he wanted and get out of his office as quickly as possible. I believe that students need to form bonds with individuals who they can relate to and individuals who will be around within their social circle over a period of time. If students are able to help each other, they can share their own knowledge with other students and mentor them through their own experiences. This form of peer mentoring is powerful due to the influence students have on one another and their ability to relate to what their peers are experiencing. (Leadership Journal, 2009)

Marrs et al. (2007) look at engagement of at risk students and how they are unable to fit into the dominant social group. Students who are labeled as at risk many times struggle when trying to lose their label of being seen as a problem student by their peers and teachers. Although this attention is unconstructive, it is attention that the student sees as a challenge to someone else. When looking at the backgrounds of students and how they are unable to relate to their teachers or what they are learning in their classes, students ultimately believe that they do not belong. As an educator, I continually ask myself, "When my student walks out of my room, what is it they need to know?"

I sometimes do not know why certain individuals went into the field of education. I sit here and listen to them talk about how they are holding their students to high expectations by giving them the same assignment twice, or sending the assignment home for the student to complete. Do they not understand that their students can not relate to the information they are teaching, do not see purpose or value in what is being taught, or have more important responsibilities to take care of at home instead of their poster project. As educators, I thought we should be the ones who find alternative methods to reach our students and differentiate our instruction. At the end of the day I feel that if one of my students fails, I failed as a teacher. I think that one of the biggest issues within the field of education is the fact that we as educators do not reflect enough on our own practices, always being able to dish out the grade but not being able to get critiqued by others. (Leadership Journal, 2010)

One of the contributing factors for student success is their home life and what value is placed on education. If a family is simply in survival mode, living paycheck to paycheck, or if parents did not have positive schooling experiences themselves, this can be seen in the behaviors of their student. Low performing students need to be able to set goals for themselves and see purpose or value in having an education. When families living in chaotic conditions were given money to relieve their problem, families focused more on their student's education (Brown & Low, 2008). This research shows that financial stability is a way of getting parents more invested in the education of their students, wanting them to be successful and financially stable.

This participatory action research project focused on the development of peer mentoring groups at Wayside Middle School located in southern New Jersey. The students identified to participate in this action research study were low performing students, based on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), a state test given to all students in grades 3-8 at the end of each year, student report cards, and student disciplinary files. The purpose of this research was to provide opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with students from similar backgrounds and

expose them to the resources available to them within the school, district, and community. One of the issues that many of the identified students faced was their lack of ability to communicate effectively within the educational system. The students' lack of ability to navigate the educational system could be due to a lack of exposure or utilization of resources available.

Identifying the Problem

I had been teaching at Wayside Middle School for five years, and during that time we were visited by the CAPA Team twice a year. This is a group of educators, hired by the New Jersey Department of Education, who work with schools that are not meeting proficiency within the state. They conduct walkthroughs of classrooms and review data that have been collected throughout the course of the school year.

During spring 2009, I spoke with my school and district administration concerning the conversation that took place during the Spring CAPA benchmark meeting. It was agreed by those in attendance at the benchmark meeting that something needed to be put in place that would address the needs of students who were not meeting proficiency on the state test. Once it was agreed that peer mentoring groups would be beneficial to the students, school, and district, I began identifying the other programs available within the school to develop a vision for what was needed within the peer mentoring group. The purpose of peer mentoring groups, criteria for selecting students and an outline of topics to discuss during our meetings were developed. This information was provided to school administration in order to be granted permission to move forward.

One of the major obstacles I anticipated was the retirement of those administrators who approved and supported my project at the conclusion of the 2009 – 2010 school

year. This meant that I would need to gain the support of the newly hired administration in order for second order change to occur and peer mentoring to continue in years to come. Understanding my concern, my building principal wanted me to get everything together during the summer 2009 and implement the peer mentoring groups during the 2009 – 2010 school year. Although I had the full support of my school and district administration, I found that one of the major issues I ran into was gaining access to our school's database from those who held access codes outside of our administration and within our middle management departments. Edgar Schein (2004) says,

> Culture is both a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior, and a set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior.(p. 1)

Providing usernames and passwords to this information was something outside of the norms, but it was through the relationships I had built that I was able to navigate my school, and received the information that I needed.

Although I felt as though I had strong ties when it came to receiving support from the district administration, when I requested access to student records within my own building from the "gatekeeper" housed in middle management, he was unwilling to provide me with the access codes necessary, saying that he would be questioned by central administration or members of the Board of Education. When my building principal contacted the same individual to confirm the fact that I had permission to access these records from her and central administration, my principal ran into the same circumstances and was told why I should not be given access to such confidential records. Frustrated with the system, my building principal paired me up with one of our guidance counselors who provided me with all of the information that I needed.

Although I was not able to gain access from the middle management, it was the relationships I had developed with my school administrator and guidance counselor that provided the information I needed to move forward.

Selection of Participating Students

As I began identifying students eligible to participate in the research study, I decided to work with our incoming sixth grade students, since they had yet to be exposed to the middle school setting, coming from one of our four sending elementary schools. During August 2009, I reviewed the test scores of students who would be entering sixth grade for the 2009 – 2010 school year. In order to understand the organization of Wayside Middle School, it was important to know that the school was broken up into three small learning communities. The purpose of small learning communities was to take a school of about 500 students and turn it into three smaller schools of about 180 students in each community. Arranging the school into small learning communities allowed for teachers, students, and parents to build greater relationships while the students attend the school. Only sixth grade students who were placed in my small learning community were eligible to participate, ensuring the students I selected had the same availability and scheduling as me.

Throughout the course of that summer, I reviewed the test scores and records of the 57 students who would be entering the sixth grade within my small learning community. When identifying possible participants the main requirement was that the student had fallen under one of the low performing sub groups as identified by the NJ ASK. The four low performing sub groups were: economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, and special education. Once this list was created, I began to look

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at their numerical test scores, grades, and disciplinary infractions from the previous year. Of the 57 students, 24 students were identified as meeting the initial requirements to participate (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics of Sixth Grade Students

(Identified = 24 students / Total Sixth Grade = 123)

Group	% of Identified Students	% of Total 6th Grade
Economically Disadvantaged	91.7% (22 students)	66.7% (82 students)
Hispanic	29.2% (7 students)	52.8% (65 students)
Black	12.5% (3 students)	24.4% (30 students)
Special Education (mainstreamed)	8.3% (2 students)	13% (16 students)

***Students can be a part of more than one sub group, other than race

The students were categorized into these subgroups when they first registered to attend the school district. Although some students fell under more than one race, their identified race depended on which race was selected at the time parents registered their students to attend school. The category of economically disadvantaged is given to any student who receives free or reduced lunch depending on their parents' income and ability to provide meals to their students on a daily basis.

Once the 24 students were identified, based on falling into one of the low performing sub groups, I looked at the numerical test scores of each student on the NJ ASK (Table 2). In fifth grade, students were tested in the areas of mathematics and language arts literacy. In order to be considered proficient, students had to receive a score

of 200 or above, the criterion was the same for both subject area tests. Any score below 200 was considered to be partially proficient. Any score that was 250 or higher was considered advanced proficient, with the highest possible score being a 300. These were the same data that the CAPA team used when they were analyzing the root causes for failure within Wayside Middle School, and identifying the sub groups of students who were not meeting proficiency.

Table 2

Student Scores on 5th Grade NJ ASK 2008 -2009 School Year

(24 students)

Subject Area	% Partially Below 200	% Proficient 200 – 249	%Advanced 250 or Above
Language Arts Literacy	41.7% (10 students)	58.3% (14 students)	0%
Mathematics	20.8% (5 students)	79.2% (19 students)	0%

When looking at these results, it was obvious that students performed much better in mathematics than they did in language arts literacy. Four of the identified students were partially proficient in both language arts literacy and mathematics. Thirteen students were proficient in both language arts literacy and mathematics, and seven students were partially proficient in one subject and proficient in the other. One thing that these data do not show the reader is the fact that six of the scores reported under the partial proficiency category were within 10 points of being proficient.

> Growing up not a test taker, it is hard for me to look at data from a test that is administered over the course of one week and make judgments on a student based

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on this information. Questions continually come into my mind as I look at this information: Was it a bad day? Did the student eat breakfast? Did they get into a fight with their brother at the bus stop? Are they not feeling well? I feel like there are too many factors that are not even taken into consideration when administering this assessment. As educators we are continually being told that it is essential that we differentiate our instruction because not everyone learns the same way. In this instance we are assuming that everyone performs well with paper and pencil assessments. (Leadership Journal, 2009)

As I began to review academic transcripts from the student's fifth grade year, I was hopeful that I would get a better picture of the students I would be working with in addition to seeing if there was any correlation between the students' NJ ASK scores and their performance academically throughout the course of a school year. Of the 24 students, 15 of the students received below an 80 percent on their academic report card for the year in language arts literacy or mathematics. There were no student failures in language arts literacy or mathematics for the year. It was the school district's policy that any student failing either subject for the year would not be promoted to the sixth grade. Nine students received grades above 80 percent in their four academic areas. These same nine students were also proficient in both language arts literacy and mathematics on the NJ ASK. At this point I eliminated these nine students from participating in the action research study since they were academically successful both in the classroom and on standardized assessments. The only reason these nine students were a part of the 24 identified was because they were a part of one of the low performing subgroups.

Once the tentative list of 15 prospective students had been created, the logistics of the peer mentoring sessions were arranged. I had been told by administration not to interfere with the academic periods, limiting me to meet with the students during their 20-minute study hall periods twice a week. We met in my classroom, since it was not being used during that period of the day. I had decided to have students sit around my

large group table, since it would arrange them in a way that made it easy to talk to one another.

Student Recruitment

I met with each of the 15 students individually and explained to them that I wanted to create a group where students could come together and help one another succeed in their academic classes. I explained the purpose of our meetings would be to focus on study skills and issues that the students faced in school. Once students said they would be willing to participate, I provided each student with an envelope that had the parental consent letter (Appendix D) and asked that they return the consent form to me as soon as possible. In addition to sending this information home, I also attempted to contact each of the 15 parents by phone to explain the purpose of peer mentoring groups with each of them. Out of 15 parents contacted, eight answered the phone or returned my call. Many of the parents seemed interested in having their student participate, while some were simply "yesing" me to get me off the phone. Out of the seven parents who I was not able to contact, four numbers I called had been disconnected. When I asked these students about the contact number, they were aware that their home phones had been disconnected, but three of them were not even able to provide me with alternative numbers. The one student gave me a cell phone number that went straight to voice mail and the voice mailbox was full, not allowing me to leave a message.

Seven students returned their permission forms immediately, granting permission for the students to participate in the peer mentoring group. One parent attached a letter requesting more information on the peer mentoring groups and the dates that it would be taking place. I responded to his inquiry immediately and informed him that if he had any

other questions to contact me. Of the eight students that were remaining, two students moved within the first three weeks of school. One student moved to another school within the district and the other student relocated to Florida with his family. Three of the families who did not grant permission for their students to participate were also homes where the parents did not speak English. I was not able to contact these parents since I did not have the resources available to communicate, but they returned the form stating that they did not want their student participating. Two students never returned the form and said they were not interested in participating. One student informed me that he did not like getting involved in other people's business. Although I re-explained the process to him, he was still not interested. The other three students did not return their permission slips, but I did receive verbal approval from their parents prior to starting the peer mentoring groups and over time was able to get the signed forms also. Once the forms had been collected, I had been given permission from the parents of 10 students to participate in the peer mentoring group.

Student Profiles

Antonio – Antonio is a White male who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores, he was just proficient in mathematics, receiving a 200, and he was below proficient in language arts. His academic grades were average in all areas except for mathematics where he carried a letter grade of a D for his fifth grade year. Antonio had a difficult time getting along with his peers and always felt he was getting picked on by others.

Sammy – Sammy is a Black male who also falls under our economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores he was below proficient in

language arts and proficient in mathematics. Academically, his final grades fell in the C and D range for his fifth grade year. Sammy had grown up in a difficult home and his grandmother was now his primary guardian. In class Sammy was always willing to help others, but could rarely get his own work done.

Daniel – Daniel is White male who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores he was proficient in mathematics and below proficient in language arts. His academic grades were all in the D range for his fifth grade year. Although he had been tested for special educational services on two separate occasions, his scores and grades were never low enough to justify the classification.

Chelsea – Chelsea is a Hispanic female who also falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on her NJ ASK scores she is below proficient in mathematics and proficient in language arts. Her academic grades were all in the B and C range for her fifth grade year. The area where Chelsea really stood out was her discipline referrals. In all of the situations Chelsea was using inappropriate language and speaking out of turn within class.

Nadine – Nadine is a Black female who also falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Nadine was also classified and received special education services to assist her academically. Based on her NJ ASK scores, she was below proficient in both mathematics and language arts. Her academic grades were in the C and D range for language arts and mathematics, but she failed social studies for the academic year.

Jessica – Jessica is a Hispanic female who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Jessica was also classified and received special education

services to assist her academically. Based on her NJ ASK scores she was below proficient in both mathematics and language arts. Her academic grades were in the D range, failing math for the academic year. Jessica had a lot of academic insecurities based on previous school experiences.

Noreen – Noreen is a Black female who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on her NJ ASK scores she was proficient in mathematics and below proficient in language arts. Her grades in mathematics and science were in the B range, and her grades in language arts and social students were in the C range. Noreen was extremely shy among her classmates and was reluctant at times to participate.

Jonathon – Jonathon is a Hispanic male who also fell under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores he was proficient in mathematics and partially proficient in language arts. His grades academically fell in the B and C range. Entering school he had told me he did not like reading and there was nothing I could do to change his mind.

Jesse – Jesse is a Hispanic male who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores he was partially proficient in both mathematics and language arts. In math and language arts he held a D average for the year, and in science and social studies he held a B average. When Jesse was first approached about participating in the peer mentoring groups he informed me that he did not like getting into other people's business. Getting to know Jesse better, it turned out that he liked getting involved in everyone's business within my class.

Manny – Manny is a Hispanic male who falls under the economically disadvantaged sub group. Based on his NJ ASK scores he was partially proficient in both

mathematics and language arts. Academically he held a B and C average in all of his classes. As a student Manny was extremely shy and had a difficult time following directions and completing assignments. Manny was also bilingual speaking Spanish when he was at home and English while he was in school.

Peer Mentoring Group Model

The peer mentoring group was arranged to include students who have similar educational backgrounds, based on test scores and grades, and need additional support in the educational settings. The purpose of the program was to provide students the resources and skills necessary to help and rely on one another for positive support. Trust was built within the group by setting parameters and creating a safe environment where students felt comfortable to share their stories among their peers without the fear of being judged.

On days that the peer mentoring group would meet, a topic would be presented to the group for discussion. The focus of the topics surrounded various subject areas and comprehension skills necessary for the students to be successful. One student was responsible for leading the group and calling on students when it was their turn to talk. Another student was responsible for keeping the group on track, which I discuss in upcoming chapters, happened often. Finally, a third student was responsible for keeping track of time and ensuring the last three minutes be spent as a reflection. The three roles would switch for each session, allowing each student the opportunity to be responsible and providing them with a sense of ownership over the process. Although we were only supposed to meet for 20 minutes twice a week, many of our peer mentoring sessions would continue for the full 40-minute period.

Key Findings

Low performing sub groups do not have any program specifically dedicated to their needs within Wayside Middle School. While identifying students to participate in the peer mentoring groups, a pattern became evident between students who did not perform well on the NJ ASK and a student's final academic grades for the school year in the areas of language arts literacy and mathematics. Research shows that students need to be able to relate to others and see value in what they are learning in order to be successful. Based on the idea that students need to have someone they can relate to, peer mentoring was selected in hopes that it would cause positive effects for students since students would have more to relate to than an adult mentor assigned to them. Peer mentoring groups provide students with a greater influence over their peers who might not be able to understand or relate to situations they face in school.

Within Cycle I, I realized that something I would have to do in order to make this action research successful was find various ways to motivate the students to participate, something I discuss further in upcoming cycles. Since the implementation of peer mentoring groups was not mandatory, I needed the students to be intrinsically motivated and want to participate. This should be a positive school experience and something they want to share with their peers. Although I had the list of participating students, one of my major concerns was that I would run out of topics to discuss with the students. This concern is addressed within Cycle II and Cycle III.

Throughout the course of Cycle I, data were collected through NJ ASK scores and academic records. I navigated my way through our school district's administration to get the information I needed to identify the students who would be eligible to participate.

Logistically I used our school schedule to decide on when and where the peer mentoring would take place and how often we would be meeting. Besides the quantitative data, I also used my observations and journal entries in helping me decide the direction this action research should focus. The information I gathered within Cycle I allowed me to better develop the implementation of peer mentoring groups within Cycle II.

Reflection

As I look back at the process I took to identify students, I realize that I learned from the many roadblocks I faced along the way. I believe that the relationships I had built with staff members and administration over the past five years were essential to my success in navigating the bureaucracy of the school system. In any situation, I believe it is important that all parties involved are invested in the process, and in this case it would be the facilitator, the student, and the parents.

The investment of the students and parents was established through my vision that I shared with them as an advocate for their students and wanting to see their students be successful both academically and socially. I realized through the limited conversations that I had with the parents and students that this action research study was doing more than just providing students with the skills necessary to be successful academically, but also an opportunity to become familiar with what programs were available to them within school and a great way for them to create relationships with students from other schools.

At the conclusion of Cycle I, I identified a number of concerns in moving forward with the peer mentoring group. My first concern was the fact that the peer mentoring group was not something the students had to participate in and there was no guarantee that they would. When recruiting students they would have to want to participate

themselves. I considered their motivation to participate and ensured that our meetings as a group would be something they found rewarding. The second concern was the actual process of implementing the peer mentoring group. I did not want to place too much structure within our meetings, wanting the discussions and meetings to go in whichever direction they might. It had been my vision that the students would come to the peer mentoring group and we would discuss different topics concerning academics. The topics that the first sessions focused on were study skills, reading comprehension strategies, and academic responsibilities. Students would discuss how these issues were affecting them and in return, the other students in the peer mentoring group would offer appropriate advice. Once the peer mentoring group started I had to make sure that my vision did not get in the way with what the students could develop on their own. An issue that kept arising was having enough time to discuss the issues on the table without being interrupted by the sound of the bell, indicating the end of the period. In an effort to provide the participating students with consistency, this is a problem I addressed immediately.

One of the benefits that I found to identifying the students, prior to the start of the school year, was that I had no idea of the students' personalities or academic capabilities going into the situation. The only information that I was able to work with were the data provided to me through the state test scores, academic grades, and discipline referrals. Having this information alone allowed me to form an unbiased opinion of the students and who would benefit most from the peer mentoring group.

I realize now that not everyone might see low performance on a state test or poor academic grades as a problem, depending on what they value and how they view

education. In many households success might be seen when their student is able to cook dinner for the family or take care of a younger sibling while a parent is working. The purpose of the peer mentoring group was to teach the participating students how they could attain success within the classroom and school setting.

Chapter V

Cycle II – Implementation

(Fall 2009)

Introduction

Over the course of spring and summer 2009, I had planned to implement a peer mentoring group with an identified group of sixth grade students at Wayside Middle School. Since I worked with the incoming sixth grade students, I used this time to plan our meetings and review their cumulative folders that were sent from their elementary schools. Prior to gaining the support and resources of the school district, I discussed my thoughts of implementing a peer mentoring group with colleagues, parents, and students. The purpose for developing a peer mentoring group was to benefit the non proficient sub groups both academically and socially. Although supplemental programming had previously been implemented within the school to support student success, none of the programming targeted the non proficient sub groups specifically. The programs available at Wayside Middle School had been open to the entire student population. The targeted students were not taking advantage of the resources available to them based on student responses and attendance rates at after school activities. Research shows that low percentages of students within urban settings participate in after school activities, causing them to have less of an interest in their education (Shann, 2001).

Receiving the support of my school administrator and guidance counselor made this action research project possible to implement. It was this support that provided me with the access necessary to collect the data from Cycle I over the summer months and implement the peer mentoring group at the beginning of the 2009 school year. An area that I had not considered was the additional responsibility of implementing a program

within my work environment on top of my regular teaching responsibilities. I definitely felt as though there was more pressure with this research study since everyone in my building knew what I was working on, and were watching to see what results would come through the implementation of this action research project. My colleagues' support offered me valuable insight reflecting their views on the topic of peer mentoring, which I discuss within Cycle III.

The cycles I had developed for peer mentoring were based on research and initial data collected in Cycle I in an effort to positively affect student achievement. During Cycle I, I gathered the data necessary for me to identify the students I would be soliciting to participate in the peer mentoring groups. Once the 2009 school year began, I developed relationships with each of the students I had identified. I realized then that determining the students who would participate over the summer months was extremely beneficial because the selection was unbiased, only using the numbers I was given when selecting students to participate. The only data that were telling of the students were discipline referral forms. These forms provided detailed accounts of what had taken place, causing the student to be written up. The disciplinary referral forms were based on the perspective of the staff member writing the referral. When I spoke with each of the students, I explained to them the purpose of the peer mentoring and how I wanted them to be a part of a group where they could help other students. I told them that the conversations we had would be about both school and social issues.

Implementation of Peer Mentoring

Addressing the concerns from Cycle I, I first dealt with motivation of the students participating. I quickly realized that since we were planning on meeting prior to their

lunch period, students were going to be hungry and distracted. Understanding this, I decided that I would provide the students with snacks each time we met to ensure that they were not distracted or in a hurry to leave our discussions. The participating students took ownership and began to bring in their own snacks to share with the group. Each of the students participating came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and many times did not have money to purchase supplies for school such as pencils or paper, yet it was these same students who were adamant on bringing in snacks for their peers on days we would meet. Students demonstrated that they placed a value on their peer mentoring group since they were willing to spend their money on items for the meetings. When I asked Sammy, who was using a plastic bag as his book bag until I brought in one of my old ones, why it had been so easy for him to bring in food items, he said there was always food lying around, and his grandmother would never notice.

Another way that students demonstrated their motivation to participate was through the relationships they had developed with each other. Although I was not leading the peer mentoring group, I had been facilitating the conversations and providing the focus questions each time we met. Cox and Orehovec (2007) discuss the positive effects student and faculty interactions have on a students' perception of the classroom. Their motivation to participate is why it had been essential for me to gain their trust and support during Cycle I, ensuring their participation in Cycle II.

Emerging Concepts and Themes

As I began collecting data within Cycle II, I noticed that key words were continually appearing through our conversations. As the researcher, I took these concepts and was able to develop three different themes. The three themes that emerged from our

meetings were: Self Awareness, Influence of Others, and Behaviors. Self awareness deals

with their understanding of themselves and what they value. Influence of others is

focused around how the students interact and the amount of control their peers or family

members have over them. Behaviors target the student's physical reactions to various

situations. Once the three major themes were identified, I created an interpretation of the

purpose behind the research. Based on the interpretation I was then able to develop my

five research questions, which I answer by the end of this research project (see Table 3).

Table 3

Code Matrix

First Iteration: Emerging Concepts		
Responsibility	Collaboration	Anxious / Awkward
Acceptance	Group Concern	Negative
Values	Resources	Positive
Acknowledgement	Communication	Assumptions
Self Esteem	Mentor	
Perceptions / Assumptions	Family	
	Friends	
Second Iteration: Themes		
Self Awareness	Influence of Others	Behaviors
Third Iteration: Interpretation		
All too often, a school system will initiate programming and support services without adequately identifying the weak academic skill base or individual needs of their low performing students. The purpose of my research is to develop a support system that will positively impact student academic and social proficiency at Wayside Middle School. I will apply a mixed methods approach. The purpose of the quantitative survey and data analysis is to select the participating students and create a baseline for those students participating. The purpose of the qualitative observations and interviews is to interpret and analyze the perceptions of the students and staff concerning mentoring. I will apply the data collected to identify what processes and resources are necessary to create effective school programming that result in student achievement.		
Fourth Iteration: Research Questions		

Research Question #1	Research Question #2	Research Question #3
What perceptions do low performing minority students hold towards school?	How does peer mentoring impact the social issues of the identified students?	How does peer mentoring impact the academic issues of the identified students?

Research Question #4	Research Question #5
What influence do students have on their peers when working in a mentoring capacity?	How does my leadership theory affect the perceptions and relationships developed?

Throughout this action research project I continually reflected on the original issue, and how the identified subgroups were not meeting proficiency on the NJ ASK. After collecting the data of incoming sixth grade students in Cycle I, I realized that these same students were not performing academically based on their final grades from fifth grade. Based on the data collected within Cycle I, I had decided that the conversations held amongst the peer mentoring group should focus on academic issues and concerns.

During Cycle II, a common theme appeared within my coded field notes. Our conversations would usually begin discussing a comprehension strategy or a specific subject area. The conversation would quickly turn into something that another student had said or done within that class, rather than focusing on the topic provided. Through coded field notes and student interviews, I realized that student issues with one another were a main cause for their low performance in class and, ultimately, on the state assessment.

The peer mentoring group took place during the school day, which meant I first had to discuss the logistics with my building administrator concerning my responsibilities contractually. Within my nine period schedule, I am contractually obligated to teach six

periods, conference one period, team collaboration one period, and one period for lunch. Based on this, my building administrator told me that I would have to meet with students during my lunch period. Meeting with students during my lunch period ensured that participating students did not miss any of their own academic periods, since their lunch period coincided with mine. I then spoke to the school guidance counselor who was able to change their schedules, ensuring that they were each in the same study hall and lunch periods. My classroom was available during this time of the day and we met at one of the group tables.

Once the peer mentoring group began, ensuring that the students stayed motivated and remembered to attend was at times problematic. I made it a point to remind the students as I saw them arrive the mornings of our meetings and I noticed students in the hallway reminding each other. The second logistical issue I faced was the fact that I was competing with the time that our school counselor and speech therapist met with students. After speaking with the school counselor, she agreed that she could work around my schedule, but sadly for our speech therapist, there was not as easy solution. Our speech therapist was shared between buildings, and that meant there were only certain days and times that she was available to meet with students. Since two of the participating students had speech twice a week, they were only able to come to one of the two peer mentoring group sessions.

Peer Mentoring Begins

During late September 2009 the peer mentoring group began to meet twice a week for 40 minutes, meeting a total of 36 official times. Prior to meeting, I had the opportunity to get to know each student. Some students, however, did not know one

another since they had come from different elementary schools within the district. The first activity I had the students do was to select a student that they did not know previously and to interview each other in two minutes. Once the students were finished, they were responsible for introducing the person they had interviewed to the group. This ice breaker activity really seemed to make everyone involved more comfortable with one another. I then went over the ground rules for our meetings and what I expected from each of them. This included being respectful of one another, listening, and remembering that although I was not participating, if anything was said that could lead me to believe that someone or the individual speaking was in danger, it was my responsibility to report it to our school administration. I did not want any of the students believing that everything they said would be confidential. I also made it clear to them that I was still in school just as they were, I showed them my recorder and informed them that sometimes I would be taping the conversations we had, which would help me with my papers and putting different assignments together. The students were very interested in the recorder and wanted to see how it worked, which I demonstrated for them to see. At the end of many sessions, the bell would ring and the students would not finish their conversation before getting up to leave.

In the beginning of our group meetings, Jessica and Antonio did not always attend the peer mentoring group regularly. Over time, Jessica began attending while Antonio changed his mind by November and said he did not want to participate with the group. Over time Antonio seemed to have more difficulties transitioning to middle school and communicating with his peers. As his language arts teacher, I found myself conferencing with Antonio one on one concerning a number of behavior issues throughout the course

of the school year. During one of his last days attending the peer mentoring group, he

discussed how he has dealt with conflicts involving other students in the past:

> The anger that Antonio holds comes out as he discusses the conflicts he has had
> with other student and the way in which he has handled these issues in the past is
> through fighting. The other students immediately stop spinning in their chairs as
> they hear where his comments are going and seem taken back. After listening to
> Antonio, they remind him that he could get into serious trouble or even get hurt
> by fighting other students. I notice a look of excitement from Antonio's eyes as
> the other students pay closer attention to what he is saying. Antonio seems to put
> his guard up and not say anything else during the conversation this day. I cannot
> imagine what it would be like to go through my day with a constant defense up.
> (Field Notes, October 7, 2009)

Administration of the Pre-Survey

During the first meeting of the peer mentoring group students were given a survey

concerning their backgrounds and perception towards school and self (Appendix A). The

purpose of the survey was to find out the student's perceptions towards a number of

various questions. The first questions concerned ethnicity, age, and who they currently

live with at home. The questions then continued with their parents' background

concerning education and employment. The students were then asked a series of yes or

no questions, explanation boxes were provided to elaborate on their responses for some,

about their academic and social behaviors in school, their involvement outside of school,

and whether or not they felt they had clear expectations established in or out of school.

The final questions the students were asked was who their mentor was and what they

wanted to become when they grew up. While taking this survey, many students had

difficulty understanding what I meant by ethnicity and wanted to know if they were able

to list more than one. Many students also did not understand the definition of a mentor. I

explained this to the students, saying it could be someone that had been assigned to you

formally or simply someone you look up to or can rely on for good advice. Nadine then

shared an organization she was a part of in elementary school where students were paired up with another teacher in the building to meet once a week, the other students knew of the mentoring program to which she referred. I then discussed how a mentor could be someone you are able to look up to or someone you feel comfortable speaking to about your issues. The results of the survey are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Pre Survey Results

Please answer the following questions and respond to the appropriate questions:	Yes	No
Do you make good grades?	7	3
Do you get into trouble at school?	4	6
Do you take part in school activities?	1	9
Do you take part in community activities?	1	9
Do you attend church, synagogue, etc.?	3	7
Do you believe your school sets clear rules and expectations?	0	10
Do you feel safe within your school?	7	3
Are there staff members in the school you feel like you can talk to?	3	7
Do your parents set clear rules and expectations for you?	7	3
Do your parents punish you when you break the rules?	4	6
Do you spend time studying during each week?	0	10
Do you spend time doing your homework each week	10	0
Do you read at home	4	6
Do you have a mentor	2	8

As I reviewed the student's responses on the survey (Appendix A), I first looked at the question students were asked concerning ethnicity. Four of the students listed themselves as more than one ethnicity. When I looked at each of their school files, each student was only classified as one of the ethnicities they had listed, not recognizing their other ethnic background. Eight of the students identified themselves as being 11 years old, one student was 10 at the time of the survey, and one student was 12 due to retention in elementary school. All of the students lived with one of their parents, with the exception of Sammy who lived with his grandmother and aunt. As I reviewed the educational background of 18 parents the students had listed students were able to select from some high school, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate. Two of the parents received some high school, five parents were high school graduates, nine parents had some college, and two parents were college graduates. Students were then asked about the parents' employment and were provided with the options of fulltime, part time, or no. Eighteen parents had been identified by the students, six had full time jobs, eight had part time jobs, and four did not have jobs.

When asked if they had a mentor, every student said yes except for two students. Those students that said they have a mentor listed a member of their family and when they were asked why, their responses addressed their idea that they viewed the individual they listed as being successful. After almost a month in school, 7 of the 10 students said they felt as though there was no adult figure they felt comfortable speaking to concerning school; I removed myself from the equation. Three of the 10 students said that they did not feel safe within Wayside Middle School. When asked who the most influential people were in their lives, all 10 students listed their family members. Three of the 10 students

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listed their influential person as their mentor also. The other seven students listed

someone they had yet to mention within their survey responses. When students were

asked how they spent their time outside of school, most explained that watching

television was how they spent the majority of their time outside of school. The second

thing that students occupied their time doing was playing outside or involvement in

unorganized sports. Studying, playing on the computer, and spending time on the phone

came in as the least amount of time for each student. Although the students were not

involved in organized activities within their school or the community, many of them

played sports, such as basketball or baseball, offered at school in their backyards or with

friends from their neighborhood. When they were asked why they did not join the school

teams, their responses varied from logistical issues to not liking the coaches or students

who participated. I quickly realized that the students felt the same way about their

academic classes and grades, many times letting personal issues with students and

teachers get in the way of their reaching their full potential academically.

> I was excited about meeting with the students today and what is great about that is that the students were excited to meet as a group also! I know that it is only the second time that we have met, but it is exciting for me to see that they are excited about participating in the peer mentoring group. It was funny because the students who are participating that are in my 5/6 period class actually went and set themselves up at the group table before the class was even dismissed. An issue that I faced today and something that I will have to think about in the future is that many students who are not participating are hearing about the group (it is only the second meeting) and want to know how they can participate. This is a great start! (Leadership Journal, September 30, 2010)

Throughout our peer mentoring sessions each week I recorded the conversations

and took field notes based on what had taken place. Creswell (2007) discusses the

importance of coding data collected within a mixed methods study and how the collection

of both qualitative and quantitative data can provide a richer meaning. The information

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gained from the field notes and recordings were extremely beneficial. They provided me with additional insight as I went back and reviewed information that might not have held meaning to me prior. These notes also assisted me in guiding the peer mentoring group in a direction that would most benefit the students involved. Throughout our times meeting as a peer mentoring group, three themes became evident through the students' conversations: self-awareness, influence of others, and behaviors. When reviewing notes or transcribed recordings each of the discussions led to one of the three areas and many times could be classified as two of the themes. Based on the emerging concepts that were evident through the observations, I separated these into the three themes. Identifying the emerging concepts and themes allowed me to really define the purpose of the study and the research questions that were the catalyst of implementing the peer mentoring group.

Student's Self-Awareness

As the peer mentoring group started, I realized that certain concepts were present among the conversations the students had. One of the major concepts that was discussed was responsibility, especially when discussing who was responsible in the classroom. Many of the students felt it was their teachers who were responsible for everything in the classroom. We then discussed the roles of teachers and students. On large poster paper we created a T-Chart and divided it into students and teachers. Under each one we listed the responsibilities each group held within the classroom. When students were asked about their responsibilities in the classroom, they agreed that they were responsible for paying attention, getting their work done, and trying their best. When the question was extended to ask the students if they demonstrated these responsibilities within their academic classes, seven of them responded that they did not. The reason the seven

students gave for not being responsible in specific classes dealt with the fact they were not interested in or did not value what was being taught. Jessica stated, "I've never been good at math." Hearing this comment, other students supported her, and said that they also have never been good within a specific subject. This statement was made during the second session that we met, and it caused me to realize that many of the students' self-esteem and perceptions they held of themselves were broken.

Influence of Others on Student Outcomes

As the conversation on academic concerns continued, many of the students referred back to individuals they looked to as role models. When they were asked why they valued the opinions and choices of these individuals their responses usually revolved around respect based on caring. The respect that the students held were for individuals who cared for them within one capacity or exemplified an image of who they would like to be in the future.

When asked about their involvement in school or within the community, many of the students explained that they were not involved. The students' influence when making decisions always reverted to the decisions and values of their friends or family members. Sammy stated, "Why would I stay after when no one I hang out with would be there?" The students' attitudes and beliefs reflected that of their friends and parents. An example of this was seen in Jessica and her feelings towards her math class and her lack of ability to perform in this class. I was able to document this through observing the students in class and interacting with one another in the hallway.

While the peer mentoring group continued meeting, I noticed that the group dynamic was changing. Many of the influences of those students not a part of the group

would be brought up during our peer mentoring meetings. These issues would many times cause issues with students concerning something that was said about them or something someone else had done. The students were looking to their peers sitting around the table for suggestions with problems and acceptance on decisions they had made. Although a friendship and bond had formed amongst the students, their conversations during our meetings together continued to drift from academic related to socially focused. The students became much more willing to share information and stories with one another, offering advice, and suggestions as it was needed.

Students continually discussed their low grades within specific classes and were continually brought up as a conversation point during our peer mentoring group meetings. The students discussed how they were receiving poor grades in various subject areas for not turning in work or not knowing the answer on quizzes or tests. Students believed that once they received their grade from the teacher that there was nothing else they could do to make it better. As a group they discussed the various options they had when their grades did not reflect their abilities. I told the students that by fixing their work it did not mean they would get more points, but their teacher might be impressed by their effort. Nadine responded to this by saying, "You expect me to do extra work and possibly get no credit? Why would I do that?" Everyone laughed, and I was about to explain when Danny took the lead explaining why Nadine should revise her work for herself. He informed Nadine that by fixing her problems and showing the teacher, she was providing to the teacher and, most importantly herself, that she was capable.

Exhibited Behaviors of Low Performing Students

One emerging idea that presented itself during the beginning peer mentoring group meetings was the awkwardness that many of the students possessed discussing academic issues. It was this awkwardness that I believe caused them to move the conversation from an academic to social focus. Through the group discussions many students became less awkward as they offered advice to their peers. Through mentoring, the participating students were able to build their confidence when discussing academic issues and advocating for themselves academically. In order for students to advocate for themselves, they had to learn how to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers. Through the peer mentoring group, students supported each other when discussing how they should word questions to their peers and teachers in a constructive way.

When the students first started within the peer mentoring group they demonstrated both positive and negative behaviors. The positive behaviors, many times, stemmed from the students wanting to show that they were able to identify a positive way to solve their problem. Students also exuded negative behaviors periodically as they tried to get the attention of their peers. When asked about how the students would react to a student bullying situation, Antonio said he would, "punch them in their face." I was surprised at how taken back the other students were with his comment. Noreen and Jesse immediately began to ask Antonio why he would think that was a good idea, or why he would use violence to solve his problems. Antonio responded by informing them that by hitting someone they would not mess with him again. The other students ignored Antonio's comment and began sharing how they would solve the same situation. A few of the

students said they would tell an adult or teacher, some said they would ignore the student, and two of the students said they would tell the student how their actions made them feel. Through the mentoring experience, students were able to see how other students they were able to relate to would handle the same situations. Students were also able to share and reflect on their own experiences when discussing issues.

Through the mentoring discussions, students realized that each one of them had their own strengths and weakness academically. As they discussed their strengths and weaknesses one day, Jesse pointed out that, "If you put all of us together we would be really smart!" It was this knowledge that allowed each student to rely on one another when they had questions about different subjects. It was important for all of the students to get rid of the negative assumptions they held for themselves and build on their strengths.

Focusing the Conversation

The peer mentoring group focused on topics concerning academics and comprehension strategies that I provided to students. During one of the group meetings that I did not provide a snack for the students, I gave each student a social studies text book to review study skills. At the sign of this Nadine remarks, "Not only did you not bring a snack for us today, but you're torturing us with history!" Of course, the students found this hysterical, but this remark led to Nadine sharing how difficult social studies had been for her to understand. Nadine was reading at a third grade reading level at the time and the social studies textbook used in our sixth grade classrooms were written at an eighth grade reading level. I shared with the students that attitude has a lot to do with their success. I asked the students how successful they could be going into a class with

the thought that they were going to fail. Through this discussion, the students realized the role their attitude plays in their success. We then went through the textbook and discussed the various text features and reading strategies that could assist them in better understanding the text. Since all of the participating students were reading below grade level, I worked with a lot of their text books which were written on grade level or higher. Although their classes were usually differentiated for students in language arts and mathematics, what they were learning in science and social studies was taught on grade level and usually very difficult for the students to fully comprehend independently. Through our weekly group meetings one of the things that I noticed was the fact that a majority of our conversations would always drift from academics to other areas of the students' lives.

> One day as we were attempting to discuss how we can ask our teachers for help when we need it, Jessica brought up the fact that it is difficult to ask for help when you are being watched by all of your classmates. I asked the students if they felt that peer pressure was a problem at Wayside Middle School. Their response to this question was an immediate and unanimous "Yes!" I then asked them if they felt comfortable handling it and if they were ready to make the right decision based on our conversations and their answer was "No!" Although peer pressure is something that I see regularly within the school, I felt as though these students had a different mentality based off of their responses to questions during earlier meetings. Nadine and Jessica continued the conversation, explaining that it is hard to not fall or listen to what you're "supposed" friends are saying to you. At this point Noreen said, "Well, I don't have any friends to pressure me." Her head was down when she said this and she seemed genuine. This broke the group out into a frenzy saying, "What are you talking about?" and "I thought I was your friend?" Noreen then smiled and nodded her head in agreement with the other students. Right as we were about to begin discussing different ways that students could avoid peer pressure, the bell rang and they exited the room. This is definitely a topic I will have to continue next week.
> (Field Notes, October 23, 2009)

As the students would get off topic, I would usually step in to redirect the students back to the topic given for the day. These topics started off as topics I provided them

with, but after the first two weeks the students began offering their own topics. Although the topics they chose dealt with academic areas, many of the topics dealt with teachers who taught the subject or students in their classes. The conversations ended up focusing on positive ways to communicate our needs to others. At the beginning of November, the students were identifying their own concerns and addressing them through the advice of other students. The topics they decided still moved from academics to something more socially related, such as how to effectively communicate with their teacher or one of their peers. Although their conversations would turn social in nature, these problems they faced were holding them back from being successful academically. I realized quickly that the separation between social and academic was not defined and ultimately affect one another.

Analysis of Implementation

Towards the end of December 2009, after three months of implementing the peer mentoring group, I began to review the students' academic grades from the first marking period. Their grades were all passing, but in some instances they were not passing by much. During our three months together, two behavior issues had been reported on Daniel and Sammy. In Daniels's situation an incident happened at the bus stop when another student said something in regarding Daniel's mother. Daniel was proud of himself that he only threatened the student and did not "punch him in the face." I agreed with him on the fact that physical violence would not have solved anything, but I asked him what alternatives he had to threatening the student. Daniel told me he could have ignored the student in hopes he would have stopped, but that if he had not defended himself, he would not have been respected by the other students who lived in his trailer

park. Sammy, on the other hand, had been written up in school for fooling around in the hallway. He was joking with another student and in the process swung his binder behind him not realizing Antonio was standing right behind him. Although Antonio was not injured, Sammy admitted to fooling around and was suspended for one day for striking another student. This was an isolated incident and Sammy had not come to Wayside Middle School with any other disciplinary infractions.

I really encouraged all of the students to get involved and participate in at least one school or community activity. Six of the students joined a group, while Noreen, Antonio, Manny, and Chelsea said they had other obligations and were not able to stay after school. In Manny's case, the after school bus would have dropped him off six blocks from his home and since that street did not have sidewalks his parents did not feel comfortable having him walk. Noreen told me that her parents did not want her staying at school any longer than she had to and wanted her to walk straight home at the end of the day. When I attempted to contact her parents, the line had been disconnected. At parent teacher conferences, Noreen's mother informed me that she was a walker and she did not want her walking home alone by herself.

Based on my observations, I found that it was essential for me to rethink the setup of our peer mentoring group and possibly incorporate more discussion concerning how to deal with social issues that students were facing. It had been my hope that by addressing this need, students would be able to focus their attention on their academic classes.

Key Findings

All of the students who participated in the peer mentoring groups passed in all subject areas for the first marking period. Based on conversations, the students were

enjoying their middle school experience and had made a smooth transition to their new school. By the end of November, six of the students became involved in an after school or community based program. After speaking to the students who were not able to participate, it came down to logistics and relying on the schedule of others.

During their transition to middle school it was essential for students to learn how to ensure success academically while facing difficult social challenges. Middle school can be a difficult transition for many students and not knowing how to handle the various situations, students could find difficulties academically. Students must learn to communicate effectively and deal with social issues responsibly. I address social issues within Cycle IV. The peer mentoring group was created to support the needs of the identified students. In the next two cycles those needs will be explored and addressed.

Chapter VI

Cycle III – Power of Words

(November 2009 – January 2010)

Introduction

The purpose of Cycle III was to compare the perceptions of the students participating in the peer mentoring group to the perceptions of educators and parents of the participating students. During Cycle I, while trying to obtain parental permission, I realized it was going to be difficult to get parents involved in this research study. Most of the parents allowed their student to participate, but made it clear to me that they were not readily available or interested in participating themselves. Benson and Martin (2003) discuss the importance of parental involvement, since home and school cultures vary so greatly within urban school settings. Based on my communication with parents, I realized it would be necessary for me to utilize all encounters with parents. The use of field notes and observations during meetings captured their perspective of education and how it had influenced their student. I wanted to identify the parents' thoughts concerning their student's low performance and what role they assumed remediating the problem, or if they felt there was a problem at all. The information obtained, from these observations with the students' parents, provided me with the information necessary to better plan or modify the peer mentoring group. Staff members were selected and participated in semi-structured interviews focusing on student influences and mentoring. Understanding the perspective of both the parents and staff members offered insight for me to close the communication gap, and work with the participating students on how to communicate effectively with their parents and teachers.

In Cycle I Wayside Middle School had not met the needs or provided services targeted towards those students who were non-proficient or classified as one of the subgroups indicated by the NJ ASK (New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge). Data were collected and the peer mentoring group was implemented, students were identified, and families of the identified students were solicited to participate. During Cycle II the peer mentoring groups were implemented and the topics discussed focused on academics. The data collected in Cycle I and Cycle II guided the focus for Cycle III, measuring the perceptions of parents and school staff members concerning student achievement was reviewed through observations, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. Each of these interviews and observations were conducted from November 2009 - January 2010. The interviews and observations from Cycle III took place in conjunction with the Cycle II data collected.

Parental Influence on Students

Throughout the course of Cycle III, I came in contact with four of the 10 parents whose students were participating in the peer mentoring group. Duncan and Magnuson (2002) look at the correlation between socioeconomic resources and the racial and ethnic test score gap. I took advantage of opportunities that I came into contact with parents to discuss their own background or feelings towards education. After any meetings where I was with one of the participating student's parents I took notes based on their responses to various questions and observed behaviors during the meeting. The following four observations came from meetings and other contact I had with the parents of the participating students.

Antonio

The first parent I met during the 2009 – 2010 school year was Antonio's father and girlfriend. Antonio's family lived close to the school and wanted to make sure that Antonio felt comfortable coming to a new school and were hoping he could meet a few of his teachers. The school year had not started, but I happened to be in my classroom the day they toured the building. Antonio seemed extremely nervous and hung very close to his father. Once his father realized that I would be his homeroom teacher, he made it clear to me that he was always available if there were any issues since he worked the graveyard shift at a local company. This statement made me question whether there had been issues in the past and acknowledge that the parent was prepared for issues in the future.

As the first few weeks of school were under way, it became apparent that Antonio was beginning to have issues in his classes and especially with his organization. Organization has been a very big issue for middle school students, especially now that they were changing classes after every subject. Our guidance counselor contacted Antonio's father because of his teachers' concern and arranged a meeting with him. Even though the meeting was scheduled for the following week, Antonio's father was in the building at the end of the school day he had been contacted. I heard him outside of my classroom speaking with his son as he had him clearing out his entire locker. He informed his son that they would be taking his papers and books home to organize every piece of paper he had accumulated over the three full weeks we had been in school. The next day, Antonio came into school with binders for every subject and folders that were labeled.

When meeting with Antonio's father the next week each of the teachers commented on how organized Antonio now was, which made the father visibly pleased. A concern was brought up by some of the teachers that Antonio seemed to have anger issues, and at this comment his father stated that Antonio used to get picked on in elementary school. The father informed us that he has always told Antonio to stick up for himself. He then went on to say that Antonio had been in a few fights at his previous school. The father's comments reflected Antonio's conversations during our peer mentoring group in the fact that he had a wall up with his peers, and Antonio was quick to disclose that if someone messed with him, his solution would be to fight them. Our school guidance counselor suggested that Antonio should meet with our school social worker to discuss his anger issues. The father was not opposed and agreed that he thought it would be beneficial.

In Antonio's situation, being told to stick up for yourself and fighting was where the communication had been lost between the father and the son. The father has told his son that he must defend himself, but the only means that Antonio had to defend himself was through physical violence. Over the course of the school year, Antonio got into two fights that his father stood by and supported his involvement. He was a member of the peer mentoring group but only came occasionally during the first three months. After winter break, Antonio no longer attended the sessions and told me he had forgotten or was not interested when I asked him.

Since Antonio was not meeting with the group I decided to meet with him weekly, one-on-one, during the class period he was in my room. During this time we discussed how everything was going in school and spoke about possible solutions to

issues he was facing. Working with Antonio made me realize that not every student has the capacity to work in a group setting with their peers. Understanding this allowed me to assist Antonio and provide him with resources or opportunities that could assist him be successful in school.

Jessica

Jessica was the type of student who would refuse to participate if she was not interested in what was taking place in the classroom. She would not participate and she would act as if she did not understand what was being said or taught. Jessica's mother made an appointment to meet with her teachers during the first marking period. During the meeting she informed the teachers of Jessica's negative experiences while in elementary school and how these experiences have hindered her progress in previous school years. The mother alluded to the fact that she had not completed high school and was going to ensure that her daughter graduated. The mother continued discussing her daughter and wanted to make sure that we were aware that she had an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) and were following the classroom modifications identified.

When speaking to the mother one-on-one, she informed me that she had been having issues with one of Jessica's teachers and "they better not think they're going to get over on me, because I will be in their face on the drop of a dime." At this point I reassured the mother that everyone was working with Jessica's best interest in mind and that if she had any concerns or issues with Jessica to feel free to contact me so we could work them out.

One month later the mother contacted me because Jessica's IEP was not being followed. She continued to tell me that she had contacted the individual in charge of monitoring the IEP and "told him where he could shove it," and that she did not get very far. I informed her that I would look into the situation and contact her with any information I found. She took this opportunity to tell me that the same teacher had been "talkin' down to her baby," to which I suggested we set a meeting with the teacher and counselor in an effort to address what was taking place in the classroom.

Jessica's tendency to shut down coincided with talking back to her teachers and telling them what she thought, a behavior evident through her mother's actions. Since my colleagues knew I had been working with her, they would send her to my room when these occurrences took place. I spoke with Jessica on a number of occasions on how her reactions to situations were not getting her the results she had expected. Jessica and I did a lot of cause and effect charts, and over time she gained a better understanding of how to deal with situations that made her uncomfortable. After becoming comfortable with the idea of the peer mentoring group, Jessica began to attend regularly and was a contributing member of the group.

Sammy

Sammy was a quieter student who kept to himself and had very low skill abilities in language arts and mathematics. Sammy did not live with his parents and he rarely ever spoke of them, he often spoke of his grandmother, with whom he lived, and his three brothers who lived with another family member. During the beginning of the school year, many of Sammy's teachers were concerned that he could fail for the marking period and possibly the year because of his grades. His grandmother came into the school for a

meeting with his guidance counselor. She told the teachers that she checks his agenda each night, but if he has problems with his homework, she simply does not know how to help him. Our guidance counselor provided the grandmother with one of our tutoring forms and explained that he could receive additional support after school for free and a bus would bring him home.

In addition to tutoring, many of Sammy's teachers tried to offer him additional support throughout the school day. Sammy benefited from tutoring and this was reflected in his grades during the following marking period. After a few of our peer mentoring groups, he really began to open up with the group and share more of his feelings with everyone. Over the course of the school year, Sammy became more and more willing to help other students and became more confident in his work and in each of his classes. Sadly, towards the end of the school year, Sammy's grandmother, his primary guardian, passed away. He did not have to move, but his aunt became his primary guardian and Sammy did not want to talk about the passing of his grandmother. After being out for four days to attend the funeral, Sammy came back to school acting as if nothing had happened.

Noreen

Noreen was extremely introverted and shy. During the first week of school, Noreen approached my desk and asked me how old I was. This was something that I had never held back from my students and I informed her that I was 27. After asking if I had kids, she responded by saying it was a shame I would never have children. When I asked her why I would never have children, she informed me that I was too old. Noreen proceeded to tell me that her mother was younger than I was and she thought she was

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really old. I informed her that many people have children all the way into their forties and sometimes older. This information astonished her, and she walked back to her seat and went back to her work. Hearing this statement made me realize that many times students accept their reality for what is considered to be the norm. In this case, Noreen did not have access to see what other opportunities were available to her outside of the environment to which she had been exposed. Hearing this I realized it was important to expose students in the peer mentoring group to goal setting and how they could create a plan for attaining their goals.

During one of our peer mentoring sessions I had the students draw a picture of their life. I gave each of the students a box of 24 crayons and told them when they were finished they could keep the crayons and just turn in their pictures. They would be sharing their pictures with the rest of the group. Noreen took out the black crayon, went over to her book bag and put the rest of the crayons away. I asked her if she had been planning on using any of the other crayons and that she could put the crayons away later. She looked up at me with worry in her face and said, "You said we could keep them, didn't you?" I reassured her she could keep the crayons to which she zipped up her book bag and went back to drawing with only the black crayon. In this situation, the crayons meant a lot to Noreen, evident in how she put them away in her book bag immediately.

The only time that I ever had the opportunity to meet her mother was on one of our school field trips. She seemed reserved, not speaking to any of the other parents, students, or even teachers unless someone spoke to her. During the trip, she made Noreen sit with her on the bus, where the other parents sat by themselves. Each time that Noreen would turn around to converse with one of the other students in the class, her mother

would remind her to face front and not speak. When I attempted to speak to the mother, her answers were limited to a few words and, after my second question, she took out her phone to look for something, ending the conversation. Although Noreen was a walker to school, her mother did not allow her to stay late for after school activities or come back to school in the evening for events. She worked the late shift and wanted Noreen to be home. Whenever someone would ask Noreen to stay late or if she was going to be attending an event that was taking place, it seemed as though her answers were programmed always saying that she had something else to do or she was simply too busy.

Staff Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used when interviewing staff members within the school district that the peer mentoring group was taking place. All staff members were interviewed using the interview protocol developed for staff (Appendix B). A total of 10 teachers at the middle school level, two student support service personnel, and two school administrators were interviewed. The interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes in length and they took place at a location of each interviewee's choice. The years of experience for those interviewed ranged between two years and 35 years experience.

The first question focused on what extent families influence a student's awareness of school. All of the respondents agreed that a family greatly influences a student's awareness of schooling. The area where the responses differed was when the question was extended further, asking the staff members what influence educators could have on changing the perception of school within our students. The difference was not based on position of the person interviewed, but rather the number of years the individual had been

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in the field of education. The five staff members who had been in the field of education between two and five years believed that they had a greater influence on changing the attitude and perception of the students towards schooling. The nine staff members who had been in the field of education over five years did not discount their ability to positively influence students, but focused their answers more towards the other variables, such as individual experiences and peer influence.

Two of the questions dealt with the effects families and mentoring have on behaviors of students. It was a common theme that mentors and family influence assist students when choosing right from wrong. A comment made by one of the staff members with 25 years experience was that a lot of what determines whether or not families and mentoring play a part on behaviors depend on the value students place on these relationships. The staff members felt as though the community resources available to students were not always fully utilized by families or the school district. Two of the staff members who were classroom teachers, described the difficulties they faced in building meaningful relationships with their students with all of the pressure they faced concerning pacing charts and teaching everything their students need under the constraints of a bell schedule.

Four of the questions dealt with mentoring, how it was developed, what it looked like, and what benefits could come from a relationship. It was agreed by all staff members that a mentoring relationship should be something that was agreed upon by both parties. Four of the staff members felt that mentoring relationships that were arranged worked out really well, where eight staff members felt that the best mentoring relationships were those that were not arranged but developed naturally. Those eight staff

members felt that when mentoring relationships were dictated, there was sometimes awkwardness within the relationship. Two of the staff members said that when the mentoring relationship was labeled, such as mentoring, it could take away from what might take place since there would now be an expectation on both ends. The one staff member furthered her comment by saying that a mentoring relationship should be one where each person involved could learn from one another.

The two final questions looked at peer mentoring, students mentoring students, and whether or not mentoring was something that others could be taught. Staying true to the profession of education, all 14 staff members felt that mentoring was something that could be taught and modeled for students. A concern was raised that not everyone was a born leader and that it would have to be a good match between the students who were paired to work together. Since peer pressure has been extremely influential at the middle school level, it was suggested by the staff that students who are selected as peer mentors should be monitored when meeting with students to ensure that they are providing sound and sensible advice. Through modeled expectations and an environment conducive for students to meet, the staff members felt that many students would be able to provide their peers with advice that students could relate to and understand.

Findings

Throughout the course of the school year, I had face to face contact with only four parents of the 10 students in the peer mentoring group. Two of the other parents were available by phone anytime I called, and also provided work and cell phone numbers should I ever have any concerns. Four of the parents contacted me through the parental permission slip they signed at the beginning of the school year. All of the students, with

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the exception of Noreen, found a way to come to many of the school events and four of the students participated in an after school activity. The activities that the students began to participate in were various intramural sports and two of the students began playing instruments in the school band. The students who attended school functions would usually catch a ride with one of their friends or return the permission slip saying they could take the after school activity bus for the afternoon.

When speaking to parents about their students they would always go back to a previous school year or a previous experience with another teacher. It did not matter if their child had amazing teachers for their first four years in school, if they had a bad fourth grade year, all of their problems stemmed back to that school year or that specific teacher. One of the issues when it came to mentoring was the fact that it is time sensitive, usually ending after two to three years. Mentoring being limited to a time period meant that for many students there was really no consistent person in their lives from year to year, reinforcing the benefits of a peer mentoring group.

Staff members felt that mentoring works best when the relationships were naturally developed. Although the staff believes in their power working with students, the effects of family environment overpower the influence of mentoring for students within a structured setting. In the middle school setting, teachers said that their responsibility academically sometimes hinders their ability to develop meaningful relationships with their students. Staff members also believed that placing a label on a mentoring relationship could set unrealistic expectations to a relationship.

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Chapter VII

Cycle IV – Refocusing the Conversation

(Spring / Summer 2010)

Modifying the Process

The purpose of Cycle IV was to change the focus of the dialogue between students in the peer mentoring group from academic to social topics. The reason for this movement from an academic to social focus stems from the data collected in Cycle II. Within this cycle data were also collected on each student in the form of observations, field notes, post survey, final grades, and the students' NJ ASK (New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge) scores.

In Cycle I, Wayside Middle School was not meeting the needs of their non-proficient identified sub groups as determined by the NJ ASK (New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge). A peer mentoring group was developed in Cycle I to target the students who were not meeting proficiency on the state test as well as demonstrating poor performance academically in their subject areas. Students were identified and parental permission (Appendix D) was received. During Cycle II, the peer mentoring group began to meet twice a week and focused their conversation on academic issues they faced in school. A majority of their conversations turned into discussions that involved social issues and how the participating students communicated with their peers, family members and school staff. Within Cycle III, observation and field notes from parent meetings and semi-structured interviews of staff members provided insight on parent and staff perceptions towards student learned behaviors in addition to a student's ability to act in a mentoring capacity.

Change in Conversation

Once we returned to school in January 2010, the students were aware our discussion would focus on social issues and it was decided that guidelines would be established for the conversations to be effective. As a group we decided that we would discuss situations and not individual people. When discussing teachers we would not discuss the specific subject but only our feelings and issues concerning the class. This would allow me to remain neutral, but with a possibility of four teachers to choose from, it became problematic at times. I quickly realized that there was a large disparity between how teachers attempted to help students and what students needed to be successful. Tyler and Boelter (2008) look at teacher expectations, citing the direct relation it has on student achievement.

A majority of the concerns discussed revolved around poor communication between students and staff members. I found myself speaking a lot more during these conversations, asking the students for reasons they thought the teachers would say or act in the manner that they did. I found that this really provided the student an opportunity to see things from both perspectives. Based on our discussions, it was evident that the identified students had difficulties relating to their teachers. I attributed this disconnect to varying educational backgrounds and dispositions. When a staff member relates to their students, their students are more successful academically and socially within their given setting (Li & Lal, 2006). Within Wayside Middle School the teachers servicing the participating students, including myself, came from middle to high middle class backgrounds and were not able to fully understand their students' perspective and what was expected of them outside of school or at home.

I am sitting here in awe listening to my colleagues, which I am embarrassed to call them at this moment, discuss failing a student for the year because they have a grade average of 65 in one of their subject areas. The teacher acknowledges that the student would have passed, had they completed a project. Where is the differentiation? In addition to this it is the same student who lost her grandmother this year, her sole guardian. In the past five years, this student has lost both of her parents and her grandmother, yet as educators we want to fail her with a 65? It is these exact moments when I ask myself if the student has failed themselves, have we failed them as an educator, or is it a combination of both? (Journal Entry, June 2008)

Throughout the course of this action research study I found my colleagues to be extremely supportive. I had many teachers provide me with information on students involved in the peer mentoring group and updates on how they were doing in their individual classes. This allowed me to bring up conversation topics, general in nature, which addressed issues they faced in class but had not discussed with the group. As students continued talking about social issues they faced, I found that the academic and study skill topics found their way back into the conversations. Going into this action research project, I knew that I wanted to help students provide them with positive educational experiences. I selected peer mentoring as my focus because I believed that I could help many students be successful. I had read books and worked in urban schools for over five years that I did not expect to hear or see anything that would surprise me. I quickly realized that I was not personally prepared for the topics that the students would openly discuss concerning their home lives. It is one thing to read about situations from a book or hear them in passing from a colleague, but it was very different to hear it come directly from the mouth of a 12-year-old sitting to my right.

Someone to Listen

Many times I found that students were willing to share more information than I wanted to hear. This can be interpreted in a number of ways, but I have always looked at it as they want to be heard. Moving from Cycle II to Cycle IV, I had learned a lot of information about the students participating in the peer mentoring group.

> Today was a peer mentoring group day; the students went around and discussed what they had done over the weekend. Sammy, out of nowhere, says he feels as though no one listens to him and that when they do he is not really heard. I found this to be an insightful comment, while the other students seemed confused as if they were trying to process what they had just heard. When I asked him why he felt that way his response was, "I don't know," and he held his head low. He was one of the larger students in my sixth grade class and I along with the other students did not know how to react, never seeing him like this before. I decided to turn the conversation to the students and I asked them if they had ever felt as though no one heard them. There was some silence for a while and then Chelsea raised her hand and informed the class that she believes she has felt that way and that is why she demands everyone's attention when she is speaking. Sammy listened to her comment and seemed to understand. As the bell rang and the students packed up their things I noticed that Sammy was carrying his book bag in his arms instead of on his back. When I asked him if he had another book bag, he said he would just use a bag (plastic). I then proceeded to ask him if he wanted me to bring in one of my old book bags and his eyes lit up and said, "you have an extra book bag at home?" Meanwhile, my office at home is inundated with items I consider garbage from my high school and college experience and students in my very classroom are walking around school carrying their books in food store bags because they do not have the resources to get a new one. (Journal Entry, January 8, 2010)

It was situations like this that remind me why I went into education. I find value in helping others and believe this to be true because of those who have helped me. When a student is concerned that their voice is not being heard, or if a plastic bag will hold all of their books for school, how can we expect them to produce their best work? At the age of 12 my only concerns involved girls, extracurricular activities, and then school. As an

educator, I am not always able to relate to my students completely because I have not experienced the same situations that they have encountered. I have never believed that students who are facing difficult times should be given a free pass. I do believe that as educators, it is our responsibility to not only educate them in our subject matter, but also in handling difficult situations. Many students do not realize that there are other options or opportunities available to them because they had never been exposed to other resources.

> Today was the half day before spring break and Daniel came up to me to tell me that his back was hurting him. When I asked him why his back was hurting him he told me that he slept at his grandmother's house because the electricity was turned off. He was then hesitant to tell me anymore, but he then proceeded to tell me that his mother lied to him and after she said it must have been a mistake admitted to purchasing a laptop instead of paying the electric bill. I called our school social worker, who knew the family and was able to assist them in paying their electric bill so they could return to their home. Had Daniel not told me that his home did not have electric in their house, his family could have spent upwards of one week staying at a family members house. (Journal Entry, 2010)

Duncan and Magnuson (2005) conducted research where they looked for a correlation between socioeconomic resources and closing the achievement gap. They found providing families with financial resources to have an effect on the achievement gap, but suggested that attention be focused directly on students to be most effective. In Daniel's situation, how was he supposed to be able to focus and worry about his academic grades when he could not stop worrying about where he might sleep that evening? If his family did not have enough money to pay the electric bill were they able to purchase other necessities for the family? These were all questions running through Daniel's mind as he tried to learn the slope of an angle or learn how to interpret the 6-point holistic scoring rubric.

As we continued meeting during the school year, the focus on social issues seemed to help the students and I found them helping each other outside of the peer mentoring group. During the second half of the school year, each student had become more involved in school activities, including after school tutoring programs, intramurals, and community organizations such as church groups and the scouts. I began to see improved academic grades and students really seemed to be enjoying their middle school experiences.

> When I sat down with the peer mentoring group today, I thought it was interesting that Daniel sat right next to me, because he usually sits at the opposite side of the table. When I looked at him he had placed a sheet of paper on the table. As I looked at the paper I read "MERIT ROLL." When I looked up at Daniel he was beaming with such excitement and joy. "Mr. McCarron, I haven't gotten one of these since I was in the second grade!" As a group we applauded his success and then I asked him to share with the other five students present that day what he did in order to receive this accomplishment. Daniel was very proud of himself as he provided advice to his peers on how they could be successful academically. His advice, "Turn in all your work!" (Journal Entry, February 25, 2010)

Students had benefited from the peer mentoring sessions and it was evident in the conversations they had with one another and the choices they had been making on a daily basis. I noticed that their demeanor within my class had positively changed, and they were more willing to speak up for themselves or for what was right. They were encouraging their peers who were not participating in the peer mentoring group to think about their decisions and reminding them of their choices as well. The peer mentoring group provided the students with a greater voice and confidence within our school. At one point of Cycle IV, I had asked the students what they thought about adding more students to the group and they all stopped and stared at me. Then Nadine spoke up and said that she felt bad saying this, but she thought that adding more people to the group would affect the relationships and trust that had already been established. The rest of the

students agreed that they had spent a lot of time getting comfortable to speak with one another and adding someone else to the group might ruin the dynamic. It was suggested by the students that I begin a second group and that way the new group could establish their own norms. I laughed at their candid response and thanked them for their suggestions.

Evaluation of Implementation

I administered the post survey / questionnaire to the students In May 2010 (Appendix A). I found the results of this assessment to be very telling with only a few of the areas having any significant change. I decided to compare the results and acknowledge what changes the students had shown between October 2009 and May 2010. The areas in which changes were evident were their involvement in activities, the amount of time studying or doing homework, what they want to grow up to become, and whether or not they had a mentor. Providing a pre and post survey (Appendix A) allowed me to measure the given change of each student over a set period of time. The purpose of supplying a survey had been to get statistical estimates of individual students and their characteristics (Fowler, 2009). In this case we looked at their changes over a given period of time.

Reviewing the results of the May 2010 survey I found that a number of responses of their involvement in activities changed to playing sports, involvement in clubs, attendance at church, and other activities. Students were participating in more activities than they were at the beginning of the school year. This involvement could be attributed partially to their increased grades and eligibility to participate in school activities. A

number of the activities that students participated in required them to maintain a specific GPA (grade point average) in order to participate.

All 10 students marked down a different mentor than they had on the pre survey. Two students marked down me as their mentor, citing that it was easy for them to discuss issues with me. The two students who marked this were two of the male students in the group. All of the female students marked down that they see each other as mentors and that they feel they can speak with each other and not worry about getting judged by the other person. This was the purpose of creating the peer mentoring group, and I think it was telling that the girls listed the each other as their mentor where the males listed me as their mentor. This goes back to the fact that students want a mentor they feel they can relate to and this shows that gender played a role in their decision.

When the student survey addressed their future goals, I found that the students' responses were much more constructive and well thought out. A majority of the students listed all of the steps leading to their goals instead of single responses, such as athlete, rapper, or singer. Identifying the steps to attaining a goal had been something done during a number of our peer mentoring group meetings. It was rewarding to see that students were able to apply these skills on their own and hopefully they will apply these skills in the future. Two students extended their response by offering alternative to their career choices if something happens or does not work out as planned.

As I reviewed the last question of who they found to be influential in their lives I realized that each of their answers now matched up with who they stated as their mentor. Since this area provided the students with the option of adding additional names, many students also listed their family members as they had in October when they first took the

survey. Students now see a direct correlation between individuals who are influential on the choices they make and the influence of a mentor.

Academically, all 10 of the participating students passed their academic classes for the school year, with six of them receiving the Merit Roll during one of the four marking periods. The Merit Roll is an honor each marking period for any student who receives a grade point average of a 3.0 or higher. Throughout the course of the school year there were concerns with three of the students in terms of whether or not they would be passing a specific subject. Each of the students in danger of failing had been assigned a tutor who was able to assist them at no charge to their families during and after the school day. Seven of the 10 students took advantage of the tutoring available to them free of charge, attending an average of 73 percent of the sessions that were possible.

When reviewing the data from the NJ ASK, four of the students remained partially proficient in language arts literacy, mathematics or both. Two of the students who remained partially proficient in language arts, now receive additional basic skills instruction in language arts in addition to their regular academic periods. All 10 of the students increased in their scores from the year prior and six of the participating students were proficient in both language art and mathematics, whereas they were partially proficient in one area or both the year prior.

Key Findings

Changing the focus of the peer mentoring group from an academic to socially focused discussions allowed the students to take ownership over the conversations that were being held. The students relied on me less for topics to discuss and were ready for our peer mentoring group with topics of their own. The only time I ever had to get

involved was when the conversation took a turn towards something that could become inappropriate. The students truly cared about the feelings and opinions of their peers and were very respectful of what each person had to say. Within the group, regardless of assigned roles, Nadine was the person who always seemed to keep the group on track when one topic would continue for a period of time. Having a group leader was beneficial, ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to say something during our very short meetings.

As students thought more about their choices, I saw a difference in the work they produced within my language arts literacy class and other subject areas. I believed that the discussion of social issues and how problems could be solved was beneficial because students were able to address their problems positively and focus their attention on what was being taught in their class. When we began, students felt as though they did not have a say or voice in things that were happening around them, but now realize that all they have to do is speak up for themselves in a way that others will listen. Speaking up for oneself could be difficult, especially in situations where an opportunity may not present itself or the person you are speaking to does not have the skill set to communicate effectively.

Throughout the course of the peer mentoring group, I found that students became more and more interested in school and were getting involved in activities on their own. I found that many students had an increased enjoyment within their academic classes. This could be attributed to our discussions of various study skills or even our discussion of how to handle situations with their teachers and peers. Once students realized that teachers were there to see them be successful, and practiced asking appropriate questions,

the issues and misunderstandings that students had within their classes earlier in the year became less of an issue. Students were getting involved in extracurricular activities and encouraged their friends to participate also.

As the peer mentoring group continued throughout the course of the school year, I noticed a constant theme surrounding difficulties with certain subjects or with certain teachers. As an educator who did not grow up as one of the minority sub groups that have been identified by the state, I cannot relate to everything the participating students had been through. Although I cannot relate, that does not mean that I would not try to understand. As an educator, I feel personally responsible to understand their situations and assist them in any way that I am capable. Towns et al. (2001) discuss the impact teachers can have on their students when a common vision is shared amongst all of the stakeholders. Many times things can be very black and white, this is the subject and you are going to learn it. This mentality has not provided students with a purpose for what they are learning or set the stage for what the expectations are within the classroom. Tyler and Boelter (2008) ascertain that when teachers hold their students to high expectations, students are more likely to perform. When students know they are being held to high expectations, they are more likely to be engaged and perform at higher levels.

Students were more engaged in the peer mentoring group when they were guiding the group discussions on their own and focusing more on social issues that concerned them. Many issues that students faced outside of school would find their way into the classroom. As the comfort of being a part of the peer mentoring group grew, students were more willing to participate and offer their advice and opinions concerning the topics that they discussed. As the facilitator, I found myself speaking less and less since they

were able to monitor their own conversations and felt comfortable enough to get their peers back on topic when conversations would shift.

As students became more comfortable with one another and the school, they became involved in extracurricular activities and community events. This involvement was great exposure for students to work on their skills interacting with other students and adults. Those students that participated were also encouraged by their friends to get involved in other programs that they enjoyed. It was evident that students were more knowledgeable of the resources available to them throughout the school and also within the community as a result of the peer mentoring group.

Chapter VIII

Leadership & Project Analysis

Introduction

When reflecting on how I was raised and molded into the person I have become, the word expectation resonates with me. My parents expected me to try my best, and in turn, I now set high expectations for myself. I have always been the type of person to challenge myself to see what I was capable of accomplishing or how far I could push myself. These expectations led me to this point in my life and encouraged me as I pursued this doctoral degree.

Through the leadership courses that I have taken within this program, I have learned that in order to be effective, I must be a reflective leader. Reflective practice works best when it is done collaboratively (Ostermann & Kottkamp, 2004). Taking part in reflective practice allows the leader to see situations from various perspectives, providing insight and growth from the experience of others. When I am not able to collaborate with others, reflective journaling allows me to get all of my thoughts on paper and reflect on the experience at a later time (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Reflective journaling has allowed me to express how I feel towards various situations without really censoring myself. Journaling has made me a strong reflective leader, and keeping a journal allows me to stay mindful of where I have been, in addition to the journey that I have taken.

Greenleaf (1977) states that as a servant leader the leader is a servant first; it is further explained that a servant leader has a natural feeling of being called to help others. Through reflective practice, I came to realize that one of my greatest challenges was my

inability to say, "No" to others. When asked to participate in various activities or attend certain school functions it is difficult for me to not accept the invitation. People have learned this about me and know that they are able to rely on me for support. I have always been of the mindset that the greater presence I show and work I complete, that more opportunities will present themselves. Knowing that others depend on me is a powerful feeling that provides me with a sense of fulfillment that I am able to help. As a servant leader, there is a power in putting the needs of others first and seeing them be successful.

As a transformational leader, it is important to empower and motivate followers to move beyond their personal interests and realize the goals of the organization (Bass, 1985). When working with others there is a power and strength that comes from collaborating and sharing ideas. Many times this collaboration allows for better and more creative ideas to be discovered. Transformational leadership is a process in which leaders and followers are engaged in conversation, raising one another to higher levels of morality and motivation (Burns, 1978). In transformational leadership, the leader and follower are at the same level, understanding that they can grow and learn from one another while doing what is best for their cause. As a leader at any level, it is important to ensure everyone within the group understands their purpose.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) looks at how motivation and morality are results of leaders and followers working together to help each other. Although I do not believe that leadership skills are innate, I do believe that people can acquire effective leadership skills to lead efficiently. Throughout my life, I have been surrounded by individuals who have

challenged me and expected the best from me. Looking at my leadership from the transformational perspective I realize that a majority of what I know as a leader has been taught to me through a shared and collaborative leadership style. I interpret transformational leadership to mean that regardless of how much experience an individual might have, as a transformational leader one is able and willing to learn from others. Transformational leadership is a logical choice when attempting to make life easier (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998). It is very easy to go through life and not ask for the help of others, or simply do what is expected. As a transformational leader, one should reflect on the relationships that have been built and the work that has been accomplished, questioning whether or not one could do better. Within a transformational role, mediocrity is never an option, and in my pursuit of achieving my personal best, the same is true.

I feel as though a transformational leader is someone who knows when to let others lead. As a leader it is important for me to teach others rather than do things for them. The act of following is a leadership quality in itself, one that many in positions of power have difficulty accepting. A transformational relationship can be powerful since the relationship is built on trust and acceptance. In order for transformational leaders to be effective, one must build relationships that are built on trust (Wheatley, 1999).

In 1987, Cronin described how a democracy would not succeed as a result of its leaders, but rather it was the responsibility of each community to honor their roles to ensure the success of the community. When I read this statement, I immediately thought of the connections I was able to make to transformational leadership. Cronin is saying

that the leaders within a democracy could not do the work by themselves, just as Burns (1978) is stressing the importance of the leader and the follower to rely on one another.

While in college I met my best friend, and this person has influenced my life because of the trust that we have built within our relationship. Working with this individual has allowed me to reflect on who I was as a leader and place my trust in the hands of someone else. Although things were not always smooth, we embraced these challenges in order to move forward and grow together. Wheatley (1999) discussed the importance of embracing chaos, stating that it is within chaos that true lasting change will occur. These experiences have allowed me to learn that although I could lead within a given situation, I would have handled the situation differently and many times not as well had I not been led by or assisted someone else. The ability to appreciate someone else's leadership tactics has allowed me to build my own leadership capacity, causing me to think about situations rather than simply reacting. Trust and relationships need reflection and work, whether they are personal or professional. Growing up I always felt as though I had something to prove. As I have matured, I realize that true success is measured not by what you are capable of accomplishing on your own, but rather what you can accomplish period. I am able to relate this idea to the outline of the transformational leadership style that focuses on someone's ability to grow as an individual when he is a part of something that transcended his own personal gain (Burns, 1978).

Throughout my college experience my best friend and I have been able to rely on and assist each other through academic and social experiences and hardships. We were both education majors and we both held leadership positions within our Greek Organizations. We served as each other's sounding board, reflecting on difficult

situations. She has been the one pushing me towards my personal best while following and supporting me through the process. Once we graduated she supported and helped me in creating my demonstration lessons as we both applied for teaching positions. I showed her different ways to present her portfolio and cover letter to interviewing committees. Each of us was able to learn and grow from the other through personal experiences. In becoming an effective leader, reflecting on my relationships, I have made myself vulnerable by relying on the abilities of others. This individual is still my biggest advocate, as I am hers, in believing in myself and pushing towards achieving my personal best. Margaret Wheatley (1999) encouraged leaders to support the process of self-actualization by giving individuals the freedom to grow. I look forward to growing old with this individual as we build our family and life together.

Servant Leadership

It is my belief that I go into most situations as a servant leader, wanting to help others and gain an understanding for what is taking place. Prior to assuming any responsibilities as a leader it is important to understand the expectations and roles within an organization. Serving others has always allowed me to feel a sense of self worth and belonging. I believe that experience and knowledge of the way an organization operates assisted me in becoming a stronger leader when it was time for me to step up and take on a greater leadership role. Kent (1994) describes a servant leader as someone who focuses on others instead of themselves; being motivated by the desire to use his talents versus his power to help others.

I have always looked at my ability to help others as my talent and something I have strived to emanate within most settings. As a servant leader one of my weaknesses

is the fact that I have difficulty saying, "No" to others. As I have grown and matured, I realize that by not saying, "No" I am jeopardizing my credibility as someone others can rely on to do a good job. Helping others allows me to build relationships with each of the individuals I assist. Cerff and Winston (2006), state that a servant leader is someone who inspires hope in his followers. This hope empowers people to be highly effective, committed, and motivated to the service of the organization. The ability to make others feel empowered let me feel needed or useful to others; it is how I have placed a value on myself or position within an organization.

I have been involved with two mentoring organizations for a number of years. Serving the needs of others has been rewarding, and as a member of these organizations I have the honor of working and mentoring individual students who have affected my life. Greenleaf (1977) believes the leader must remain conscious of the least privileged members of the community to ensure that they will benefit and not be deprived from decisions made. Working with students considered to be economically disadvantaged has kept me grounded and provided me with an understanding for the population I have been serving. My responsibilities have been that of a tutor and a mentor to three students throughout various counties in New Jersey. I approached each of these organizations to volunteer and I learned about others and myself through each experience.

As a volunteer, I tutored middle school students in all subject areas. During this time I formed a relationship with the director of the center who voiced her concern to me that most volunteers were not consistent and students were not able to rely on them always attending. Through the relationships I had built with students in the education department and various Greek organizations on campus, I rallied 12 individuals to

volunteer as tutors regularly certain days each week of the semester. Greenleaf (2002) describes a servant leader as someone who creates leaders by building trust, providing opportunities for their growth, and promoting a collaborative environment. The director of the organization was thrilled and the middle school students were supported by college students they had formed bonds with and recognized within the community. I went into this experience volunteering my time as a tutor and offered my connections and resources when I saw leadership was needed in the area of providing the students with reliable tutors.

Servant leadership starts as a feeling or desire to serve others, and then becomes a commitment (Greenleaf, 1977). Growing up as an only child, I liked having the title "Big Brother." In all instances I met with my "Little Brother" at his school during one of his non-academic periods. Although the time we spent together usually involved playing games or cards, many times it would open up conversations about school or family issues he was facing. I found myself serving the needs of each student, acting as an advocate for them to their teachers, counselors, administrators and parents. Although these students are no longer in middle school and I do not meet with them regularly, it pleases me to say that I have kept in contact with each of them through e-mail, phone, or when they visit me at my school. This continued communication shows that my passion to serve others has made an impact.

The ability to listen and connect with individuals within an organization, in order to understand what inspires their commitment and trust, is the core function of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Seeing the unspoken gratitude from someone who needed my support or guidance is the reason I chose to go into the field of education. I believe that I am the

person I am today because of the individuals who supported and encouraged me along the way. As an educator my philosophy of education is making choices based on what is best for students and providing those I come in contact with my personal best. A leader is someone who understands the intricacies of an organization prior to leading others through a change. This is the type of leader I hope I am and will continue to be.

Cycle I Leadership Analysis

As an educator at Wayside Middle School, it had been addressed during a state meeting that our school was not meeting the needs of our non-proficient sub groups based on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). The students within the sub group included: economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic, and special education. In order to target these students and address their specific needs I had conversations with teachers within the school and school administrators that transcended into the development of a peer mentoring groups. It was planned that during the peer mentoring group sessions, students would discuss various academic issues they were facing in school. Dewey (1970) felt that it was necessary for students to be supported when thinking critically and reflecting on what they had been taught.

As a school in need of improvement (SINI) for seven years, I felt called to serve these students whose needs were continuously not being met. It was important for me to identify the students during Cycle I, gain their trust, provide opportunities, and promise them a safe environment to discuss their needs and concerns (Greenleaf, 2002). The participating students needed to first realize that they might have something to offer others, prior to accepting their invitation to join the peer mentoring group. Although the students participating were not proficient in math or language arts, the goal of the peer

mentoring group was for the students to help each other. As Greenleaf (1991) states, a servant leader puts the needs of others first.

During this cycle of research, a lot of background information on the students' grades and test score data had been collected. Although I was given approval to obtain the data accessing this information became problematic. The person who was responsible for the information did not want to provide me the official authorization. I had developed relationships with a number of administrators in the district and this is how I gained access to the data I needed to move forward with the action research. Burns (1978) describes a transformational leader as someone who elicits keen charismatic qualities to bring others to the leader's common goal.

Cycle II Leadership Analysis

Moving into Cycle II, I finalized the students who would be participating in the peer mentoring group and we began our meetings. The purpose of the peer mentoring group was to provide students a safe and nurturing outlet to discuss concerns they were facing both in and out of school. The peer mentoring group could be considered similar to Senge's (1990) description of a learning community approach to leadership where all members can freely experiment without feeling afraid and vulnerable. During those first few meetings of the peer mentoring group, expectations and norms had to be established and accepted by all participants.

As the peer mentoring groups progressed, students were able to understand that the meetings were intended to provide assistance, allowing them opportunities to be successful. Greenleaf (2002) espouses the importance of promoting a collaborative environment with opportunities for growth in order to create leaders. Although students

thought these meetings were serving their individual needs they were ultimately the ones serving the needs of their peers. Once each student began to realize how receptive their peers were to their advice, they could not stop themselves. They wanted to offer advice and their opinions all the time, whether it was to members of the peer mentoring group or my language arts class.

Transformational leadership is complex and powerful because it recognizes and utilizes the self-actualizing needs of those that follow (Burns, 1978). In this situation, the students selected were followers when they were chosen, and through the peer mentoring group students were able to identify areas they could improve, ultimately identifying and reflecting on their own needs in addition to the needs of others. Burns (1978) further describes that when individuals are able to become part of something that transcends their own personal gain, they will also grow as individuals. I believe this to be true for the students who participated in the peer mentoring group.

Cycle III Leadership Analysis

Within Cycle III I measured the perceptions of parents through informal observations and field notes taken during meetings and conferences. I also interviewed staff members concerning their background and insight towards our student population who was not meeting proficiency on the NJ ASK (New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge). The purpose of this cycle was to look for comparisons between beliefs held by the parents and the teachers compared to the characteristics espoused by the students. Greenleaf (1977 believes in ensuring the research benefits the participants rather than deprive them further. In this case the research was developed because students within

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Wayside Middle School's already low performing sub groups were not performing on grade level and were not having their needs met through programming and curriculum.

As a servant leader, it was necessary for me to take advantage of every opportunity that I was given to meet the parents of the participating students. During meetings held with the parents I made sure they were aware of who I was and what was taking place during our peer mentoring group sessions. I also reinforced how the peer mentoring group was serving the needs of their student both academically and socially. Beck (1994) states, that perceiving the needs and concerns of others is an essential leadership characteristic. Through these unplanned meetings, I was able to gain insight into the parent's background, sometimes concerning their educational experiences, and this provided me with a better understanding of their students experiences and backgrounds.

As a transformational leader I chose to work with the selected students because they were identified as needing additional support in order to be successful within their educational setting. Similarly, feminist leaders care deeply about inequities and will actively seek change for the equitable distribution of resources for those individuals who are underrepresented (Strachan, 1999). Although staff members believed in mentoring, based on their interviews, many of them did not equate the students in the peer mentoring group as having more inequities in comparison to any of their other classmates. Looking to move peer mentoring groups forward it was essential for me to recognize the importance of sharing and internalizing the vision with all of the other staff members (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Cycle IV Leadership Analysis

Moving into Cycle IV, the focus of discussion amongst the students in the peer mentoring group shifted from focusing on academics to widening the conversation and allowing the students to discuss more socially based issues they were experiencing. The purpose of this cycle was to empower the students to take ownership and lead their own discussions during the peer mentoring group and collect data in the forms of academic grades, test scores, and the post student survey (Appendix A). This information provided me with the information necessary to compare with the baseline from the beginning of the school year.

As the peer mentoring group came to the end of the school year, I truly believe that those students who participated were more articulate and able to discuss their issues responsibly. Servant leaders take care of others' needs while simultaneously encouraging those served to become servant leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 2002). Towards the end of the peer mentoring group the students began to facilitate their own sessions and I was merely an observer of what was taking place. Through my attributes as a servant leader, I was able to say that those students who participated benefited and it was evident that they were serving the needs of others.

I had learned so much from the peer mentoring groups that were held, and hopefully the students were able to share what they had learned through our sessions together with others outside of our class and school. Based on field notes and observation, it was evident to me that students really excelled by receiving the additional support from the peer mentoring group and were more involved in extracurricular activities. I found the outcome of the peer mentoring group implementation to be

transformational since each person involved learned from the experience, including myself. The way that I measured each student's growth was through my analysis of the participatory observations and the comparison of the pre and post survey that was administered. The participating students were exposed to opportunities, such as clubs and organizations within the community, which they were not previously utilizing. These new opportunities that students were exposed relate to social justice leadership theory, which commands that students have equal access to the same quality of education regardless of the outcomes (Lupton, 2005). The peer mentoring group allowed the students to positively influence and empower each other, ultimately causing them to make positive choices and affecting their overall educational experience and outcome.

Recommendations for Practice in Peer Mentoring Groups

Reflecting on what had taken place during the peer mentoring group, I believe that those students who participated were truly affected. If someone were to look at this action research project and implement it within their own setting, I would have a couple of recommendations for them to take in order to be successful. The recommendations that I would give them deal with time, students, and flexibility.

In the given research study the students met on average for 20 minutes twice a week. There was never a single week where we were finished and waiting for the bell to ring. I would suggest a minimum of 40 to 60 minutes in order for the students to really get the most out of the experience. This will ensure that everything could be discussed and everyone could be heard within the time given.

I would recommend that a peer mentoring group not have more than six students. Although it was rare that all 10 students would be available to meet on each occasion,

when all 10 of them would show up it was extremely overwhelming. It is important to keep the numbers low and ensure that the students are getting the most from their meetings together. When selecting students, I would also recommend not placing friends together in the same group. This could make it difficult for the other students in the group to feel comfortable enough to share.

My final recommendation would be flexibility. The descriptions that I provided concerning peer mentoring groups within this dissertation worked because of the students who participated and the dynamic that was created. In any peer mentoring group, the facilitator needs to be reflective and make changes when he sees a need for improvement. The group of students that work together will change the needs and focus of the group. I believe that peer mentoring groups were successful within my action research because I was reflective and willing to modify what had been developed and planned.

Analysis of Research Questions

When looking at the perceptions low performing students at Wayside Middle School held towards school, it was evident through their pre surveys (Appendix A) that through their experiences they were disaffected and did not see purpose. I found through the peer mentoring group, observations, journal entries, and individual conversations their perceptions of school changed for the better. A majority of our conversations revolved around purpose and why it was so important for us to be successful in both school and life. The post survey reflects the students' interest in school and understanding of its purpose.

Peer mentoring impacted the social issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School and provided the students with opportunities to learn how they could deal

with various situations they are presented in school. Through the group meetings, I quickly realized that a majority of the conversation would move from academic concerns to social issues with friends, teachers, or even family. These were the same social issues that were keeping the students from performing well academically. Realizing the need for these students to discuss and process their social issues was the reason I switched the focus of the conversation in Cycle IV.

Peer mentoring positively impacted the academic issues of low performing students at Wayside Middle School. Through our group meetings, it was evident through their conversations that the students were beginning to look at their education differently. The major piece that I believe led to academic progress was the students' new found ability to discuss their academic issues or questions with their teachers. I realized very quickly that the reason why many of the students I was working with did not do well in class was because they did not know how or what to say to their teachers. Students were taking more pride in their work and overall academic grades, even having six of the students make the merit role, during one of the four marking periods, which requires a 3.0 average.

I found that the students were very influential when working in a mentoring capacity. The purpose of this entire process was to provide students with others that they could relate. It was this dynamic that provided the students with a lateral relationship, not placing any one student in a superior role and allowing everyone to contribute within areas they were strong and learn from others in areas they could grow. When the peer mentoring group first began, I believe that self confidence played a large role for many students not wanting to participate or not thinking they had anything to offer. Once the

students became more comfortable each student really began building their self confidence and growing academically and socially.

Limitations

A major limitation of the study was the fact that I was working with a very limited population within my building, only one percent of the school's student body. I have also begun to consider the fact that I was in direct contact with these students on a daily basis, causing for a greater relationship based on discussion and academics through test scores, academic grades, along with pre and post surveys that the students took during the fall and spring semesters. I validated this process first by receiving approval from Rowan University's Institutional Review Board. This committee monitors and reviews all research being conducted through the university. Through triangulation of data collected, I was able to validate the information I had collected to show whether or not students had been affected through the process.

The success of this project depended on the relationships I built with school officials, students, and parents. In order to receive access to student data systems I had to rely on the assistance of others. I had to refine the focus of my project enough to discuss it with students and parents and ensure that they were able to understand what I was trying to do. A challenge that I faced was the fact that I was trying to gain the support and trust of parents and students who had lost confidence in their educational system. This study took place over the course of one year. Cycle I began prior to the beginning of the school year and the final cycle, allowing me to analyze the data collected, took place one year after the start of Cycle I.

Moving forward, this action research project looked at the perceptions of low performing students, measured through the pre and post survey (Appendix A), to see what effects peer mentoring groups could have on their future success. The location of this study was in one middle school located in Southern New Jersey, housing 483 students. This study included 10 students who were willing to participate in the peer mentoring group and met the requirements necessary for the study. The methodology is explained further in four cycles. Throughout this process I reflected on the design of each cycle and discuss how I redesigned procedures within each of the cycles.

The consequence of the data collected was the information that was gained from the various qualitative and quantitative approaches. This information assisted the students as they went through the peer mentoring group and were exposed to various resources necessary for them to be successful. As data presented, I adjusted the research and process as it was necessary for the students to be successful both academically and socially within an educational setting. Throughout the course of this study I continually reflected weekly on the process, its progress, and what alterations were necessary in order to move forward. Through the reflection of data I also assessed my own leadership and how it affected others and changed through the process.

Self Analysis

In order to measure my leadership through this action research project, I decided to randomly select 25 of my colleagues. Using our staff roster of 73 employees, 25 were randomly selected and asked to take a survey containing four open ended questions relating to my leadership and the change, if any, I had brought to Wayside Middle School. An e-mail was sent to each of the selected staff members to take a four question

survey. Of the 25 staff members, 17 took the survey by the deadline they were given.

The four questions they had to answer were:

1. What leadership qualities have I demonstrated when working with staff members?

2. What leadership qualities have I demonstrated when working with students?

3. Do you believe that as an educator I have brought change to our school? If so, how?

4. What suggestions do you have for me to improve as a leader?

When reviewing the answers concerning leadership qualities that I had demonstrated with staff members, the common theme that emerged revolved around communication. I was referenced on 12 of the responses as a good listener and sounding board. Another common theme that emerged from these responses was my willingness to help and ability to answer questions when they arise. One of the respondents said that I was always willing to try new things and I was always positive. As a servant leader, if I believe that something new will benefit students or staff, I do not see harm in making an attempt and finding the downfalls within a situation. In order to see the positive within a situation one must be reflective on what had taken place.

Three themes emerged from the responses to the second question concerning leadership qualities I demonstrated when working with students. The first theme was reflection and understanding; five respondents said that I was continually having my students reflect on their actions to ensure that they truly have an understanding of what had happened. The second theme that emerged from the staff responses dealt with modeling and setting expectations. Two respondents cited how I continually modeled

appropriate behaviors for students in the hallway and the classroom. The third theme revolved around caring and that students knew I was hard on them because I cared.

When looking at the third question, the focus moved towards change, asking if I had brought any change to our school. Staff members responded to this based on my involvement within the various areas of our school. Teachers commented on how I had brought change to the school through my involvement on school committees, development of programs, and modeling best practices within my classroom as a demonstration classroom. As a transformational leader, I believe that the change I have evidenced in my school has improved my skills as a leader along with the skills of my colleagues.

The final question that was asked on the survey asked the question of how I could improve as a leader. Eleven of the responses encouraged me to continue focusing on research and educational leadership. Five of the responses reinforced the idea that I should remember the importance of always being open to learning. As a transformational leader, I am espousing that I will continually learn new things and grow from those with whom I come in contact.

Moving forward in education, I will continue looking for new opportunities to learn and grow as an individual. I believe that action research has really brought change within my current setting and I am confident in leading change in the future. In order for school change to be effective, it is important to receive buy in from all of the stakeholders and to complete an organizational scan, identifying the areas where improvement is needed. As a transformational and servant leader, I will continue putting the needs of others first while learning from those that I am leading.

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Pre and Post Student Survey

Student's Name:_____ **Date:**_____

Student Survey

Ethnicity:		**Age:**		**I live with:**
O White	O African American	O 10	O 14	O Both Parents
O Asian	O Hispanic / Latino	O 11	O 15	O Mother Only O Father Only
O Other _____		O 12	O 16	O Mother and Stepfather
		O 13		O Father and Stepmother
				O Other _____

What is the educational level of your parent/guardian				
	Some High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate
Mother				
Father				
Other				

Do your parents have a job?			
	Yes – Full Time	Yes – Part Time	No
Mother			
Father			
Other			

Please answer the following questions and respond to the appropriate questions:	Yes	No
Do you make good grades?		
Do you get into trouble at school? If yes, explain:		
Do you take part in school activities? If yes, explain:		
Do you take part in community activities? If yes, explain:		
Do you attend church, synagogue, etc.? If yes, explain:		
Do you believe your school sets clear rules and expectations? Please explain:		
Do you feel safe within your school? Please explain:		
Are there staff members in the school you feel you can talk to?		
Do your parents set clear rules and expectations for you?		
Do your parents punish you when you break the rules?		
How much time do you spend studying during the week? Please specify:_____		
How much time do you spend on homework during the week? Please specify:_____		
Does anyone in your home help you with your homework?		
What types of reading materials do you have at home? If yes, explain:		

Do you have a mentor? If so, who?_____

When I grow up, I want to become a:_____

<center>**Appendix B**</center>

<center>**Interview Protocol**</center>

<center>**The Effects of Group Mentoring on Academic and Social Issues of Identified Under**</center>

<center>**Achieving Student Populations within an Urban Middle School**</center>

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this assessment. This interview should last no more than 30 minutes. I will be recording the interview and I will be taking notes during the interview. I will give you the opportunity to look at the transcribed interview and make any changes. All of our notes will be written using a pseudonym. Your responses will never be reported in a way that can identify you. Do you have any questions regarding the procedure?

Interview Questions – Staff / Administration

To what extent do families influence a student's awareness of school (academics and process)?
How can we as educators change or sustain student perception of school, in order to create a positive school experience?

To what extent do families influence a student's social interactions (behaviors and language) with others?
How can we as educators change or sustain student perception of social interactions, in order to create a positive school experience?

What is mentoring?
What experiences do you have with mentoring? Or have you ever been a mentor?

Ideally, what does a student / teacher mentoring relationship look like?
How do you think a mentoring relationship actually plays out?

What benefits can a mentor have with students who have social issues (discipline issues)?
Other than mentoring, what resources are currently available to students who demonstrate social issues?

What benefits can a mentor have with students who are academically disadvantaged (test scores and grades)?
Other than mentoring, what resources are currently available to students who are academically disadvantaged?

Do you believe students are able to provide valuable advice and feedback to their peers?
What type of setting is necessary for this to be effective (community / school)?

Can this be taught or modeled? *What programs or lessons are available for this?*

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Staff Survey Notice and Questions

Good Morning!

I am currently in the final stages of completing my dissertation in Educational Leadership from Rowan University. As a part of my dissertation, I need to assess my leadership. Although I believe I am a reflective leader, I have to say that I am also biased. I was hoping that you would be able to assist me by answering four questions concerning my leadership. All you have to do is follow the link at the bottom of the e-mail, respond to the questions, and select "done" at the bottom of the screen. If you are not able to answer a question, you also have the option of skipping it and moving on to the next question. By opening this link, you are opening a separate web site making your response anonymous. The deadline to take the survey is Thursday, February 17th. Thank you for your continued support and assistance.

Sean

http://www.surveymonkey. co m/s/VTHGVJG

Questions

1. What leadership qualities have I demonstrated when working with staff members?

2. What leadership qualities have I demonstrated when working with students?

3. Do you believe that as an educator I have brought change to our school? If so, how?

4. What suggestions do you have for me to improve as a leader?
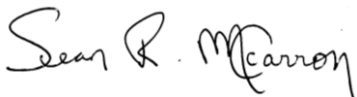
Appendix D

Parent Consent Letter

Dear Parent / Guardian:

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Department at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. James Coaxum, as part of my doctoral dissertation concerning the effects of mentoring on social and academic achievement. I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. The goal of the study is to determine what role mentoring has on a student's social and academic achievement.

Each child will be invited to eat lunch with me and a small group of other students on a weekly basis. Throughout this period of time a variety of social and academic topics will be discussed with the group. During these weekly meetings student's perceptions and conversations will be recorded, through audio tape and notes, and used as data for the research project. All data collected will identify the students by their initials, to protect their identity. Additional data, such as test scores and discipline records will be accessed for the purpose of the study.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child's standing within the school. At the conclusion of the study a summary of the results will be made available to all interested parents. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 856-362-8887 or you may contact Dr. James Coaxum III at (856) 256-4779. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sean R. McCarron

Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study by checking the appropriate statement below and returning this letter to me by, September 8th.

Student's Name:_____

_____ I grant permission for my student to participate in this study.

_____ I do not grant permission for my student to participate in this study.

Appendix E

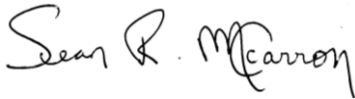## Interview Consent Letter

October 30, 2009

Dear _____ ,

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Department at Rowan University under the supervision of Dr. James Coaxum. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research project concerning the effects of mentoring on social and academic achievement. I am requesting permission to interview you as a part of this research. The goal of my study is to determine the role mentoring has on a student's social and academic achievement.

This interview should last no more than 30 minutes. I will be recording the interview and taking notes. I will also give you the opportunity to look at the transcribed interview and make any changes. All of my notes will be written using a pseudonym. Your interview responses will not be reported in a way that can identify you.

At the conclusion of the study, a summary of the results will be made available to all interested participants. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 856-776-6775, or you may contact Dr. James Coaxum at (856) 256-4779. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sean R. McCarron

Sean R. McCarron

Please indicate whether or not you wish to participate in this study by checking the appropriate statement below and returning this letter to me.

Participant's Name:_____

_____ I grant permission to participate in this study.

_____ I do not grant permission to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature:_____

E-Mail:_____Date:_____