Determining the Quality and Impact of an E-Mentoring Program on At-Risk Youth

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the quality of an e-mentoring program and the impact of participation on at-risk high school students enrolled in dropout prevention programs. The quality of the program was evaluated based on the ease of implementation, use of technology, and overall satisfaction. Indicators of student’s self-esteem, career decision, attendance, and GED test scores were used to gauge the impact of participation. Design-based research methods were used to compare the participation of students in mentored and control groups. The results indicated a high level of satisfaction with ease of implementation, use of technology, and overall program quality. However, there were no significant differences between the mentored and control groups regarding self-esteem, career indecision, attendance, and GED test scores. Since the GED dropout prevention program provides guidance and mentorship by the coordinator, further research is suggested to account for the role of program and other contributing variables. Also, further research is suggested on the ancillary benefits of e-mentoring.

Keywords: GED Exit Option, High School Dropouts, Online Mentoring, Rapport Building, Self-Esteem, Young Adults

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of young adult dropouts is a national crisis in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2008 about 3.0 million youth (16-24-year-olds) were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). This group accounted for 8 percent of the 38 million youth in the United States at that time. Although the dropout rate declined between 1972 (14.6%) and 2008 (8%), leaving school without a diploma continues to pose a serious problem to the social and eco-
omic health of the country as well as to the
individual dropout (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009).

As the United States moves towards a
higher-skilled labor force, high school dropouts
will have a more difficult time surviving eco-
nomically (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009; Swanson,
2007). Unemployment for dropouts is typically
high (32.9%), while their earnings over a 40-year
period is about $350,000 less than those of high
school graduates in the workforce (Spotlight on
Statistics, 2007). Not surprisingly, other issues
associated with drop outs are poverty, abuse,
drug abuse, and criminal activity; which are the
result of limited preparation needed to succeed
in today’s workplace (Swanson, 2007).

Early on in the 20th century, dropping out
of high school was not perceived as a problem
in society because very few students enrolled
in high school. As the United States moved
from a rural to an urban economy, more and
more students enrolled in and graduated from
high school. However, there were plenty of
jobs available for adults without high school
diplomas. Today, this is simply not the case.
Entry into the workforce has become more
competitive as it is closely tied to education
and skills development (Swanson, 2007; U.S.
Census Bureau, 2004).

To address drop out issues, various pro-
grams and strategies have been developed to
help keep students in school including modify-
ing the instructional environment, strengthening
school membership, developing relationships
with students, counseling, and mentoring.
Unfortunately, many of these programs rarely
constitute a major effort to hold youth in school.
They are often too small, poorly funded, and
isolated to make a dent in the dropout problem
(Hammond, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Stanard,
2003). In this context, mentoring has been
identified as a promising dropout prevention
strategy with five million young adults involved
in school and community-based mentoring
programs nationwide (Foster, 2001). Mentor-
ing can be found in programs that address the
needs of youth at risk for educational failure,
teen pregnancy, delinquency and substance
abuse. Mentoring can also be found in voca-
tional education programs at the secondary and
postsecondary levels, and is often implemented
as part of a dropout prevention program (Ham-
mond et al., 2007).

However, the lack of time and the limited
number of available adults have hindered the
successful implementation of many mentoring
programs. That is, one of the main reasons
mentoring has not been fully implemented
in education settings is that the demand for
adult mentors far outweighs the available
supply. According to the National Mentoring
Partnership (n.d.), approximately 15 million
young Americans are waiting to be matched
with a mentor. Volunteers are scarce. People
who otherwise might wish to become mentors
are leading very busy and hectic lives (Foster,
2001). Many adults who might make excellent
role models for at-risk youth feel they are un-
able to commit the required time. Further, some
potential mentors might be afraid to go into the
neighborhoods that are most in need of positive
role models for youth (Neils, 2002).

In short, although mentoring has been
found to be a promising way to promote student
success and decrease the high school dropout
rate, like many other intervention strategies,
has not become a major component in the
American education model. Hence, practitio-
ners have begun to search for alternative forms
of mentoring such as e-mentoring. E-mentoring
is the telecommunications version of mentoring
(Bozeman & Feeney, 2007). Using the Internet,
mentors are connected to their mentees. Many
mentors cannot or do not have the time or abil-
ity to go to a classroom, but they can become
involved with students via the Internet. Usually,
the interaction between the mentor and mentee
occurs via e-mail, but it could also entail instant
messaging, audio and video conferencing, and
online discussion boards both synchronously
and asynchronously (Guy, 2002; Single &
Muller, 2001). Currently, as access to technol-
ogy and the Internet has become more common
in homes and schools across the country, the
interest in e-mentoring programs has grown
(Single & Single, 2005).