

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-

DOI: 10.4018/ijavet.2015040102

nomic 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 economically (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 programs and strategies have been developed to help keep students in school including modifying 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). Mentoring 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 (Hammond 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 unable 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, it has not become a major component in the American education model. Hence, practitioners 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 ability 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 technology 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).

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