

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Youth Development Through Mentorship: A Los Angeles School-Based Mentorship Program Among Latino Children

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4671d1h4>

Journal

Journal of Community Health, 39(2)

ISSN

0094-5145

Authors

Coller, Ryan J
Kuo, Alice A

Publication Date

2014-04-01

DOI

10.1007/s10900-013-9762-1

Peer reviewed

Youth Development Through Mentorship: A Los Angeles School-Based Mentorship Program Among Latino Children

Ryan J. Collier · Alice A. Kuo

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

Abstract Despite higher risk for school failure, few school-based mentoring (SBM) studies have focused on low-income at-risk Latino children. We describe the development and evaluation of the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), a sustainable, high-quality, SBM program among urban Latino students. Based on evidence from work in other communities, YEP was created as a partnership between the 4th and 5th grades at a Los Angeles Title I elementary school and university undergraduates. We tested the feasibility of applying a previously validated relationship quality assessment tool in this population. Since 2008, 61 mentor and mentee pairs have participated in YEP, with an average relationship length of 1.5 years. Through 2010, over 95 % of pairs had relationships lasting at least 1 year, while 47 % lasted 2 or more years. Seventy-percent of mentees and 85 % of mentors were female, and an increased trend for early relationship termination was observed among male mentees. Through 2011, relationships lasted under 1 year among 29 % of male mentees compared to 7 % of female mentees ($p = 0.15$). A previously validated relationship quality assessment tool was easily incorporated into YEP, with relationships exhibiting youth-centeredness, emotional engagement and low

dissatisfaction. After 5 years, YEP has become a feasible and sustainable SBM program providing long-term relationships for low-income Latino children. These relationships may improve youth health through fewer risky behaviors and attitude improvements. Future work should focus on supporting male mentors and mentees.

Keywords Mentoring · School-based intervention · Latino · Youth development

Background

High-quality mentoring relationships have promoted child health through improvements in academic performance, positive feelings of self-worth, perceived social acceptance, relationships with others, and decreases in high-risk behaviors like alcohol/tobacco use and violence [1–8]. Directors of mentoring programs, however, frequently face challenges successfully pairing mentors with mentees as well as monitoring the activities of the relationships. Disadvantaged or vulnerable youths tend to benefit the most from mentorship [4, 7], but defining a mentor–mentee pair as “successful” can be difficult [9]. Several factors are associated with successful relationships, including setting clear visit expectations, focusing on building trust and friendship, recruiting mentors with experience working with children, providing adequate mentor orientation and ongoing training, and facilitating mentors’ feelings of effectiveness [2–5, 10]. Relationship length also appears to be a critical component to successful mentoring outcomes [11].

To date, most mentoring research has focused on community-based mentor (CBM) programs modeled similarly to big brothers/big sisters (BBBS). School-based mentor

R. J. Collier (✉)

Department of Pediatrics, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, 600 Highland Ave, Madison, WI 53792, USA
e-mail: rcoller@pediatrics.wisc.edu

A. A. Kuo

Departments of Internal Medicine, Pediatrics and Health Policy and Management, David Geffen School of Medicine UCLA, UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, 757 Westwood Plaza, Suite 7501, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA
e-mail: akuo@mednet.ucla.edu

(SBM) programs, however, are the fastest growing form of mentorship [7, 12]. These SBMs reach a unique population of children since referrals come from teachers rather than parents, and because they provide a unique mentor pool of typically younger adults and college students [7]. Outcomes of SBM programs could be similar to those seen in CBM programs [7–9, 11, 13–15], though much of the evidence for SBM programs has been extrapolated from CBM programs.

Thus far, very little mentoring work has focused specifically on low-income Latino children, while this population is at very high risk for underachievement and dropout [8]. Work with this community could provide important insights into mentoring amongst a population with significantly different demographics, cultural practices, and social capital, and therefore likely distinct outcomes from populations that have been studied in the past.

Previous work in our community [12] identified a desire among the youth for formal mentorship programs. As a response in 2008, the youth empowerment program (YEP), a partnership between 4th and 5th grade students at a Los Angeles Title I elementary school and a university undergraduate student-run service-learning organization, Students for Community Outreach, Promotion, and Education (SCOPE), was created.

This paper describes YEP's development and evaluation as a sustainable, high-quality, school-based mentorship program among urban Latino students. Program design was based on evidence from other communities, with a focus on creating long-term relationships. We hypothesized that a previously validated tool for assessing relationship quality [13] could be used in this population to monitor program success.

Methods

Participants

Stoner Avenue Elementary School is a Title I funded school of 376 students (K-5) in Los Angeles. The student body is 91 % Latino, with about 55 % classified as English learners [14]. The entire student body (100 %) receives free and reduced lunch, and is classified as economically disadvantaged [15], with 21 % living in poverty [16, 17]. The school uses the Open Court Reading System, a phonics and phonemic awareness approach to teach reading, which assigns children a standardized proficiency score. In 2010–2011, only 37 % of students were proficient in reading, and 60 % were proficient in mathematics [18, 19].

Eligible mentees were 4th grade students identified by their teacher as likely to benefit from mentorship after parent permission was obtained. At the request of school

administration, students just below (but near) reading proficiency were prioritized for the program with the hope of improving their scores to proficiency. Teachers identified children expected to remain at the school for the next 1–2 years.

Eligible mentors were UCLA undergraduates, established volunteers in SCOPE, with an interest in mentorship and a commitment to participate for at least 1 year. Mentors with accepted applications were paired with mentees according to shared interests, as well as language and gender where possible.

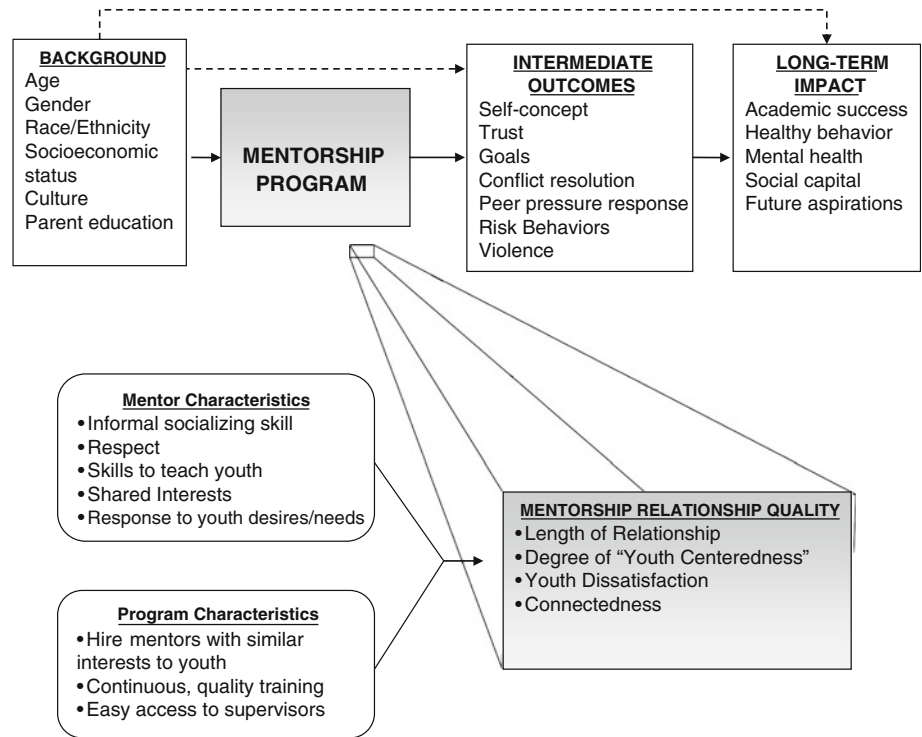
Approach

Development of the conceptual framework shown in Fig. 1, based on previous mentoring research [2, 4, 7] was the initial step. This model served as the foundation for designing program-specific activities, training, and evaluation. Students, mentors, teachers, and parents are equal partners in program development.

A mandatory 3-h training program using previously developed tool kits [18, 19] was expanded in 2010, to a one-quarter undergraduate course taught by program faculty, elementary school teachers, and other expert guest lecturers. This course, required prior to YEP participation, serves several functions: (1) to provide a formal didactic education on topics related to youth mentorship, (2) to train the prospective mentors in program expectations and logistics; and (3) to select truly motivated undergraduate mentors. For example, the course reviews tips for success, skills for working with children who have ADHD, an introduction to juvenile justice, troubleshooting role plays, as well as how to communicate with teachers, mentees and their families, and YEP leadership.

The program curriculum shown in Fig. 2 demonstrates the dual focus of academics and socializing. Each week, mentors are expected to spend 1-h with their mentees over at least 1, and preferably 2 academic years. Mentors are asked to spend half of their time reading with the mentee and addressing one of seven revolving health topics, chosen because previous mentoring research has highlighted the potential for mentoring relationships to influence youth behaviors in these areas [1, 3–5, 7–9]. The other half of the time is spent on recreational activities determined by the mentor/mentee. A critical component, however, is letting relationships and conversations develop at their own pace, so mentors and mentees are given substantial latitude to modify the curriculum and activities as needed for their specific relationship. To make YEP sustainable, a subset of UCLA undergraduate students formed a leadership committee and assumed management responsibility for the program after 2 years, with continued faculty supervision. Institutional Review Board approvals from UCLA and the

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework for a mentorship program designed to create high-quality relationships



Los Angeles Unified School District were obtained prior to piloting YEP and its evaluation.

Evaluation

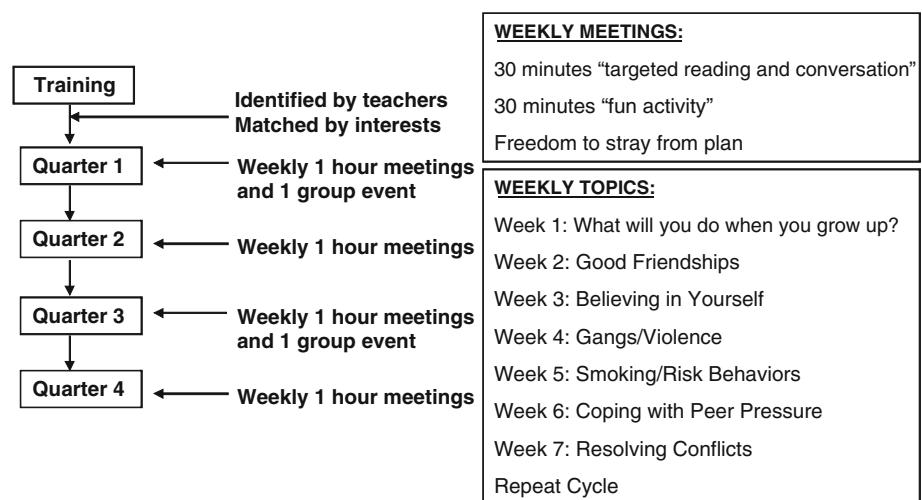
Relationship success was defined based on previously identified factors [1, 13], including relationship length, degree of youth centeredness, emotional engagement and youth dissatisfaction. A full description of the development and validation of the relationship quality assessment tool used by YEP is available elsewhere [1, 17]. Though this tool was originally developed in children aged 10–14 years involved in BBBS programs, it was adapted for use with

YEP, where children are aged 9–10 years old. Scores in each domain—youth centeredness, emotional engagement and youth dissatisfaction—range from 1 to 4. The questionnaires were given to children by their teacher to be completed independently. Results of the relationship quality assessment tool pilot are reported here.

Data Analysis

The primary evaluation outcomes were (1) number of mentor/mentee pairs, (2) average relationship length, (3) percent of relationships lasting at least 1 year, and (4) relationship quality assessment scores. Summary program

Fig. 2 Youth empowerment program curriculum



data and descriptive statistics were collected. Fisher's exact test was used to look for gender-based differences in the proportion of relationships failing prior to 1 year. School volunteer sign-in sheets and group activity rosters were reviewed to confirm an individual's participation. Mentor and mentee grade reports and test scores were unavailable to YEP.

Results

Since 2008, 61 mentor and mentee pairs have participated in YEP. The average relationship length through 2010 was 1.5 years, with 95 % of relationships lasting at least 1 year. Over 47 % of completed relationships have lasted 2 years or more. In total, 70 % of mentees and 85 % of mentors have been female. Program trends suggest an increasing proportion of relationships are 2 or more years, and an increasing proportion of mentees are male. Annual and cumulative recruitment/retention data is summarized in Table 1.

For completed mentor/mentee experiences, increased early relationship termination was observed for some male mentors and mentees. Among male mentors, 20 % of relationships (1 of 5) lasted less than 1 year, while for female mentors only 9 % (3 of 32) lasted under 1-year. Among male mentees, 29 % of relationships (2 of 7) failed to last 1 year, while only 7 % (2 of 30) of female mentees failed to last at least 1 year ($p = 0.15$, Fisher's Exact).

Two mentor–mentee relationships did not succeed despite persistent mentor dedication and intensive support from YEP program leadership and the mentees' teachers. Both mentees faced difficult social challenges at home, and one mentee had additional mental health issues.

The relationship quality assessment pilot was successful, with 100 % of mentees being able to independently fill out the tool in less than 10 min. As a program, YEP's average youth centeredness score was 3.7 (range 3.2–4.0), which is "very youth-centered" [13]. The average emotional engagement score was 3.4 (range 3.0–4.0), which is below

"highly engaged" but above the neutral range. Finally, the average youth dissatisfaction score was 1.9 (range 1.0–3), which is between neutral and "highly satisfied" (4 representing dissatisfaction).

Initial challenges faced by YEP in the first 5 years included securing transportation for the mentors to get to the school, organizing group-wide activities, and recruiting and retaining male mentors. Transportation limitations have been overcome by organizing a carpool schedule among mentors who own vehicles, as well as utilizing the UCLA rideshare program. Group-wide activity attendance has been improved through inviting families, organizing bus transportation for children and their parents, and hosting activities at popular locations around Los Angeles and UCLA. Recruiting and retaining male mentors remains a program challenge.

Discussion

Based on 5 years of experience, the UCLA YEP program represents a successful, high-quality and sustainable school-based mentorship program for low-income Latino elementary school children in Los Angeles. The program is based on principles from mentoring research, and is only the second report we have found exclusively in this important population [8].

Since a minimum of 1 year appears to be required before previously described mentoring benefits are observed, and since relationships under 3–6 months might actually be harmful to children [1, 5, 7], the initial program goal was to achieve relationships of 1 year or more for at least 75 % of mentor pairs. With 95 % of YEP's pairs lasting at least 1 year, YEP has achieved a high degree of success, and each year has demonstrated a higher percentage of relationships lasting at least 2 years. The rate observed by our program is substantially higher than other reported programs [1, 8] in which as many as 50 % of youth mentoring relationships dissolve within a few months. Previous research has identified an average length

Table 1 Summary of youth empowerment program recruitment and retention

Relationships starting	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
New mentee–mentor pairs	23	8	9	21	61
New female mentees (%)	19 (82.3)	8 (100)	5 (55.6)	11 (52.4)	43 (70.5)
New female mentors (%)	20 (87.0)	8 (100)	7 (77.8)	17 (80.9)	52 (85.2)
Completing at least 1-year (%)	23 (100)	7 (87.5)	8 (88.9)	–	38 (95.0) ^b
Completing 2-years or more (%) ^a	10 (43.5)	4 (50.0)	5 (55.6)	–	19 (47.5) ^b
Average relationship length (years) ^a	1.5	1.4	–	–	1.5

^a Five of the 9 relationships starting in 2010 and 19 of the 21 relationships starting in 2011 are ongoing

^b Excluding mentees starting in 2011

of SBM matches to be about 5 months [20]. Our experience keeping pairs together for at least 1 year is particularly interesting since recent work has suggested that college student mentors may be associated with increased premature relationship termination [11]. We attribute our success to the clear expectations set at the time of mentor recruitment, ongoing mentor support and selection for motivated participants due to the rigorous upfront training requirements.

The observation that male mentors and mentees may have a higher level of early relationship termination, together with the difficulty in recruiting male mentors, is important. Though the differences in these failure rates by gender were not statistically significant in our evaluation, this could be due to the small sample sizes and inadequate power. Notably, Karcher [8] found that males in elementary school actually benefit more than females from SBM relationships and suggests that boys at this age could be more receptive to school-based mentorship. These trends should continue to be followed with larger studies, since research in this area is mixed and other well-designed studies have not identified gender-specific differences in relationship length [20].

Comparable mentoring outcomes have often been observed irrespective of mentee demographics including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and family structures [4]. Mentoring may, however, impact different communities differently. For example, one study found that in a large ethnically diverse population, mentoring resources only led to decreased delinquency and aggressive behavior in the presence of other neighborhood resources [21]. One large randomized study in Latino children did observe different mentoring outcomes by gender and age [8]. Another study found that SBM had differential effects depending on the mentees' relational profile [22]. To further understand what defines successful mentoring relationships among urban Latino children, qualitative research to expand the currently accepted definitions of mentoring relationship quality and its impact would be helpful.

With YEP, the relationship quality assessment tool was sought to identify relationships at risk for termination, and provide targeted programmatic and individual-level support. Piloting this tool demonstrated feasibility in our population. The quality scores for YEP were comparable to the tool developers' experience with big brother/big sister programs, which had an average relationship length of 12.8 months. Their youth centeredness score was 3.69, emotional engagement score was 3.55, and youth dissatisfaction score was 1.61 [13]. Overall, YEP demonstrated a high degree of youth centeredness and adequate emotional engagement.

The utility of using this tool was particularly evident from the dissatisfaction scores. Despite an average score

between neutral and satisfied, we identified a respondent with a score in the dissatisfied range, suggesting an opportunity for program leadership to support that specific mentor–mentee pair. These data will be highly valuable to follow over time. Since YEP's population was different from the original validation population, a larger validation study involving Latino children in SBM programs would be useful.

Limitations

Limitations to the YEP evaluation include the small size and low statistical power, as well as the lack of mentee outcomes and a control group to demonstrate the programs' impact. Previous well-designed studies have shown significant but modest effect sizes from SBM programs [4, 8, 23]. Though YEP relationships are lasting for a relatively long time period and the relationship quality appears to be adequate, it is difficult to know if YEP modifies mentee outcomes such as self-concept, academic outcomes or risk behaviors. Based on qualitative comments, the teachers, mentees and mentors have all reported very positive effects of the program including improvements in school attendance, attitudes, classroom behavior, and reading skills. YEP leaders are working to collect data to assess academic and behavioral indicators quantitatively.

Future steps for YEP leadership are to continue program expansion and increasing male participation through targeted recruitment. We plan to perform relationship quality assessments quarterly in order to collect time-series data for program improvement. Finally, we will begin investigating why males might be having higher rates of early relationship termination. We will provide focused support to these pairs as well as those with low quality assessment scores.

Conclusions

The development and evaluation of YEP has demonstrated the feasibility of creating a viable and successful SBM program among low-income Latino children. Based on qualitative feedback, YEP has also translated into personal and educational improvement among both mentor and mentee participants. After only 5 years, this program has established a reliable presence at its partner elementary school, producing longer than usual relationship lengths, and evidence of high relationship quality. Long-term, high-quality SBM relationships can be successfully accomplished between young adults and low-income Latino children. Validated assessment tools can feasibly be used to monitor program success or identify relationships which are succeeding and at-risk for failing. Qualitative findings

suggest improvements in attitudes, classroom behavior and attendance. These programs may be an effective and low-cost strategy for schools to support vulnerable and at-risk children.

Acknowledgments We acknowledge the Stoner Avenue Elementary school principals and elementary school teachers whose support is integral to YEP's existence. We also thank the numerous SCOPE mentors and LAUSD students who have participated in this program. We thank Dr. Rashmi Shetgiri for her help in early program conceptualization. The SCOPE program is partially supported by a federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau Pipeline Grant (T16MC06956, PI = Kuo).

References

- Grossman, J., & Rhodes, J. (2002). The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 199–219.
- Grossman, J., & Bulle, M. (2006). Review of what youth programs do to increase the connectedness of youth with adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 6, 788–799.
- Sipe, C. (2002). Mentoring programs for adolescents: A research summary. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 31(6), 251–260.
- DuBois, D., Holloway, B., Valentine, J., & Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 157–197.
- Rhodes, J., Reddy, R., Roffman, J., & Grossman, J. (2005). Promoting successful youth mentoring relationships: A preliminary screening questionnaire. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26(2), 147–167.
- Rhodes, J., Grossman, J., & Resch, N. (2000). Agents of change: Pathways through which mentoring relationships influence adolescents' academic adjustment. *Child Development*, 71(6), 1662–1671.
- Herrera, C. (2004). *School-based mentoring: A closer look*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- Karcher, M. (2008). The study of mentoring in the learning environment (SMILE): A randomized evaluation of the effectiveness of school-based mentoring. *Prevention Science*, 9(2), 99–113.
- Herrera, C., Sipe, C., McClanahan, W., Arbretton, A., & Pepper, S. (2000). *Mentoring school-age children: Relationship Development in community-based and school-based programs*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- Karcher, M., Nakkula, M., & Harris, J. (2005). Developmental mentoring match characteristics: Correspondence between mentors' and mentees' assessments of relationship quality. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26(2), 93–110.
- Grossman, J., Chan, C., Schwartz, S., & Rhodes, J. (2011). The test of time in school-based mentoring: The role of relationship duration and re-matching on academic outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(2), 43–54.
- Shetgiri, R., Kataoka, S., Ryan, G., Askew, L., Chung, P., & Schuster, M. (2009). Risk and resilience in Latinos: A community-based participatory research study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 37(6), S217–S224.
- Jucovy, L. (2002). *Measuring the quality of mentor-youth relationships: A tool for mentoring programs*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- Office of Data and Accountability, "2010–2011 school accountability report card (SARC)," Los Angeles unified school district, 2011. Online. Available: <http://search.lausd.k12.ca.us/cgi-bin/fccgi.exe?w3exec=sarc4&which=6952>. Accessed August 13, 2013.
- Los Angeles Unified School District, "Data summary sheet," 2011. Online. Available: <http://schoolinfosheet.lausd.net/budget-reports/reports.jsp>. Accessed August 13, 2013.
- Neighborhood Knowledge California (NKCA), UCLA School of Public Affairs, Online. Available: http://www.spa.ucla.edu/policy-forum/default.cfm?page=nkca_info.cfm. Accessed March 18, 2012.
- US Census Bureau, "census 2000 block group," Online. Available: <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/cob/bg2000.html>. Accessed March 19, 2012.
- Cannata, A., Garringer, M., Taylor, J., & Arvalo, E. (2006). *Preparing participants for mentoring: The U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Program's guide to initial training of volunteers, youth, and parents*, Encino, CA: Mentor Resource Center.
- Jucovy, L. (2001). *Training new mentors*. Philadelphia, PA: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's National Mentoring Center.
- Bernstein, L., Rappaport, C., Olsho, L., Hunt, D., & Levin, M. (2009). *Impact evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education's student mentoring program*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education and Regional Assistance.
- Molnar, B., Cerda, M., Roberts, A., & Buka, S. (2008). Effects of neighborhood resources on aggressive and delinquent behaviors among urban youths. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98(6), 1086–1093.
- Schwartz, S., Rhodes, J., Chan, C., & Herrera, C. (2011). The impact of school-based mentoring on youths with different relational profiles. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(2), 450–462.
- Herrera, C., Grossman, J., Kauh, T., & McMaken, J. (2011). Mentoring in schools: An impact study of big brothers big sisters school-based mentoring. *Child Development*, 82(1), 346–361.