A Peer Mentoring Intervention Program for 9th Grade Students: Peer Group Connection

Ashley Bennetone, Lydia A. Kiefer, Tasha Thompson, & Ali Velasco

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

March 18th, 2015
Literature Review

Often referred as a “rite of passage”, the transition from middle school to high school has proven to have impactful ramifications when students transition without adequate support. The transition from middle school to high school is so critical, that it has a direct effect on high school graduation rates. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014), 81% of students in the United States graduate from high school, and it is the first year of high school in which more students fail than any other grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). There is an urgent need for high schools to support their freshmen academically, emotionally, and socially since it is during the first year when students are “most vulnerable for dropping out of school” (Johnson, Simon, & Mun, 2014, p. 1).

Reasons for the difficulty of the middle school to high school transition are varied. Freshmen are faced with rigorous courses and a new environment, often much bigger in size and in population compared to their middle school. Because of this distinct difference, ninth graders often experience a lack of connectedness towards their new school (Roybal, Thornton, Usinger, 2014). Moreover, the “anxiety is complicated further by other normative changes such as puberty, social and emotional development, the growing importance of peer relationships, and the development of higher order cognitive skills” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 15). Ninth graders are simultaneously experiencing acute changes in the physical, emotional, and cognitive domains.

When students transition to ninth grade sans sufficient support from school staff and parents, negative consequences are more likely to materialize. Research has shown that there is a
decline in achievement in regards to grade point average and standardized tests (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Moreover, Benner (2011) states that students at this stage are less involved in extracurricular activities, have a higher amount of absences, and show less engagement in academics. As cited by Holcomb-McComb (2000), low-income and minority students are twice as likely to repeat ninth grade; minority students, in particular, are high-risk students for this adjustment period (Newman et al., 2000; Reyes et al., 1994). In addition, students who struggle with basic reading and math skills drop out of school within two years (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Lastly, many ninth graders are juggling social needs such as friendships, relationships, and status, and according to Cauley & Jovanovich (2006), when schools do not support students with their social needs, it will directly impact their academics.

There are effective strategies that high schools can implement in order to ease the transition from middle school to high school. First and foremost, schools will need to take a proactive approach in addressing the copious needs of freshmen. A peer mentoring program is a strategy that schools can put into effect by having the older students mentor the freshmen. A peer-mentoring program, when delivered well, can help freshmen “socially acclimate to the high school (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2009), support students academically (Lampert, 2005) and assist students with homework and study skills (Charleton, 1998)” (Roybal, Thornton, Usinger, 2014, p. 483). In essence, a peer-mentoring program can bridge the gap in helping freshmen feel more connected to school. When students feel like they belong to the school, they are more motivated, they will work harder, and they will miss less school (Roybal, Thornton, Usinger, 2014).

Finally, a peer-mentoring program can be especially beneficial for minority students. Hispanics have a high school graduation rate of 76%, and American Indians/Alaska Natives and
Blacks have a graduate of 68% each (NCES, 2014). According to Becker and Luthar (2002), students of color “derive greater academic benefits if educators develop programs to facilitate student connectedness” (Roybal et al., 2014, p. 476). Given the benefits and cost-effectiveness of a peer mentoring program, it is a worthy to consider implementing it in schools.

Peer Group Connection

The Peer Group Connection (PGC) is a peer mentoring program based on the theory of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which “teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007). The program goal incorporates integrating at-risk and diverse student groups into mentoring relationships with older students at their schools (Johnson, Simon, & Mun, 2014). Developed for students transitioning from middle school to high school (8th to 9th grade), the PGC is an evidence-based intervention that is focused on facilitating the transition to 9th grade within the school (Center for Supportive Schools, 2015). Since 1979, the PGC has demonstrated its effectiveness in over 175 schools around the country to increase graduation rates and decrease male student drop-outs. These findings are supported by the a 4-year longitudinal study conducted by Rutgers University and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Center for Supportive Schools, 2015).

The Peer Group Connection consists of several levels of training: initially, school staff and other stakeholders are thoroughly trained to deliver and implement the Peer Group Connection in their schools. A select group of staff is given an 11-day intensive training course over a period of a year and half in order to learn how to impart the program goals and train junior and senior students in how to mentor their peers. According to Johnson, Simon, and Mun, peer
group interactions and school culture and climate have consistently been named among the most influential factors on student learning (2014). For high school juniors and seniors, PGC is a course taken for credit over the span of a year that teaches skills such as leadership, role modeling, and mentor development. These upperclass students in turn co-lead groups of a dozen freshmen that meet on a weekly basis. Some of the topics of discussion in each mentoring session include critical thinking, setting goals, working as a team, communicating effectively, emotional skills, and making decisions. As the freshmen gain skills and support from their peer mentors, they begin to develop and implement community service projects that allow them to utilize their new-found learning around their communities. An important component of PGC is the parental involvement. PGC asks parents and guardians to attend a Family Night where students will present topics that are important to them as the families will listen without judgement or comment. Blad indicates that the great success of PGC is in part contributed to the family involvement in the mentoring process that continues through the duration (2014). To reinforce learning even further, PGC’s design includes booster sessions for 10th grade students who previously completed the program in order to promote long-term effects of peer mentoring.

In Johnson, Simon, and Mun’s study of the Peer Group Connection, graduation rates for participating students was slightly higher than those of students receiving no mentoring at all (2014). In and of itself, boosting graduation rates is a commendable result, yet additionally, PGC also positively impacts student attendance. Students who were known for being absent and who also were in a mentoring program such as PGC were 52% more likely to stay in school and attend class during the year after participation than those without such program support (Blad, 2014). On a specific cultural level, PGC can positively impact the graduation rates of Latino
males, as indicated by Johnson, Simon, and Mun (2014). Overall, fewer than 50% of Latino males graduate from high school, yet in the study of PGC, 81% of Latino male participants graduated.

**Discussion**

As demonstrated in the review of literature, low-income and minority students are faced with challenges that their middle-class, white counterparts do not encounter, such as repeating the 9th grade and therefore decreasing chances of graduation (Holcomb-McComb, 2000). The research based around peer mentoring interventions and the Peer Group Connection specifically illustrates the importance of peer support in impacting the achievement of students, especially for minorities and students of low socioeconomic status. School counseling professionals seeking to strengthen achievement and attendance for 9th grade students should consider implementing evidence-based peer programming that incorporates family and staff in the process. Although a large-scale and highly involved program, PGC’s evaluative data demonstrates that its impact on students of different cultures is especially salient. Choosing to invest time and money in the Peer Group Connection or a similar, evidence-based, collaborative peer mentoring program could impact the influence and effectiveness of school counselors around the country.
References


