

Mentorships: Benefits and Effects on Career Development

Lynne Beck
Lake Elmo, Minnesota

Abstract

The personal and academic benefits of a mentorship program, the Mentor Connection, and its effects on career development were investigated. The results indicated that the program had significant personal, academic, and career-choice effects on participants. A program which includes both classroom and mentorship experiences should be an integral part of gifted programs, and there is a critical need for female mentors.

Introduction

The term mentor dates back to Homer's *Odyssey*. Before embarking on his 10-year journey, Ulysses entrusted the education of his son, Telemachus, to his wise and faithful friend Mentor. As a guardian, teacher, and surrogate father to Telemachus, Mentor defined the concept that characterizes similar relationships today. However, in her review of the literature, Merriam (1983) discovered that there is no one precise definition of mentoring. Instead, the meaning of the word "appears to be defined by the scope of a research investigation or by a particular setting where it occurs" (162).

In his extensive study based on interviews with 40 men, Levinson (1978) described mentoring as a form of love relationship. Functioning as guides, counselors, and sponsors, mentors open doors and expose protégés to a new occupational and social world with its values, customs, resources, and characters. Levinson argued that mentors help protégés realize their goals and dreams. Other researchers concur with Levinson's opinion that mentoring is essential to normal adult development (for example, Burton, 1977; Sheehy, 1976).

This view of mentoring from the perspective of adult growth and development differs from the concept of mentoring in the business world. The studies done in this field focus primarily on career development and advancement (Collins & Scott, 1978; Roche, 1979). Dalton, Thompson, & Price (1977) have even proposed a model of career development that consists of four successive stages: *apprentice*, *colleague*, *mentor*, and *sponsor*. Some writers and researchers have stressed the importance of career development of women (Dalton, 1980; Halcomb, 1980). The purpose of all these various studies has been to determine the extent of mentoring in business, its importance in terms of career development, and whether it is related to the employee's sex (Merriam, 1983).

In the field of education, the main focus of the mentor-

protégé relationship is experiential learning. Mentors in education facilitate the learning of protégés by acting as teachers, guides, counselors, role models, and friends. The literature on mentoring in education reveals that this type of relationship is particularly beneficial to gifted students because they are independent, highly motivated learners. For this reason, many educators have recommended mentorships as an integral part of gifted programs (Boston, 1976; Runions, 1980; Mosely & Todd, 1983; Ellingson, Haeger, & Feldhusen, 1986). Boston (1976) argued that mentorship programs provide gifted students with an opportunity to learn and experiment, develop their potential skills, and gain competencies (Boston, 1976). These benefits and learner outcomes are what make mentorships a valuable part of gifted education.

Although there is considerable evidence that gifted males benefit from mentor relationships, the impact on gifted females has only recently been investigated and reported (Moore, 1982; Bolton, 1980; Shamanoff, 1985). According to Grau (1985), gifted females often fail to reach their full potential because they face many psychosocial barriers to career achievement. One guidance strategy that helps gifted girls overcome these barriers is to expose them to female mentors. Women who have attained high-level positions can be extremely effective mentors for gifted girls. In addition to providing them with the benefits normally gained from male mentors, women serve as role models. By observing and imitating successful females, gifted girls not only gain knowledge,

Putting the Research to Use

Mentor relationships benefit students personally and academically and affect their career development. These relationships are particularly beneficial to gifted students because they are independent, highly motivated learners. Mentorship programs provide gifted students with opportunities to learn and experiment, develop their potential skills, and gain competencies. They also give gifted students a chance to learn about areas not offered in the high school curriculum, work with professionals in the community, and learn about educational and career options. Therefore, the curriculum for high school gifted programs should include classroom and mentorship experiences and career development and guidance. In addition, teachers and coordinators should try to recruit more female mentors since they have such positive effects on gifted female students.

skills, attitudes, and values, but learn appropriate social behavior as well.

In spite of these benefits, most gifted girls have male mentors. Sexual attraction and rumors of romantic involvement are frequently mentioned as risks of cross gender mentoring (Bolton, 1980; Halcomb, 1980; Fitt & Newton, 1981; Merriam). However, Alleman et al. (1984) discovered that mentors in cross gender pairs did not behave differently from mentors in same sex pairs. These findings suggest that differences which do exist are more often attributable to personality and situation than to sex.

The literature on mentoring in education discusses the benefits gifted students gain from mentors and the importance of mentors to females. In addition, Alleman et al. (1984) compared mentoring behavior in cross gender and same gender pairs. The research has not explored whether or not there are any differences between the benefits gained by gifted students in same gender and cross gender mentoring pairs. Furthermore, the effects of time away from the mentorship and the project area pursued during the program have not been examined.

This study investigated the benefits participants gained from a particular mentorship program, the "Mentor Connection." It focused on three specific areas: (1) the personal benefits of the program; (2) the academic benefits of the program; and (3) the effects of the program on the participants' career development. Although some of these benefits are not mutually exclusive, the distinction made for this study was based on research done on benefits gained from mentorships. The study was also designed to investigate the importance of mentors to gifted students and females and to compare the benefits gained from two types of mentoring experiences: supplemental classroom support and the mentorship itself.

In order to compare these two types of mentoring experiences, it is necessary to understand the nature of each one. The 18 week Mentor Connection course is divided into four integrated phases. After being accepted into the program, students participate in an Orientation Phase to formulate a plan for investigating their interest area, select and meet with an appropriate mentor, and discuss possible projects. During the Preparation Lab, students meet for three weeks as a class with the Mentor Connection Instructor to prepare for their interaction with mentors. This class helps students improve their communication and independent learning skills.

During the Mentorship Phase, which lasts about 14 weeks, students implement their learning plan with the mentors. Each student spends eight hours per week working on a project, observing the mentor in work situations, and exploring special interests within the field and two hours per week participating in group discussions. These weekly discussions are essential to the program because they provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and perspectives and a check-in and group-building time for the class as a unit. In this study, the benefits gained from the two group experiences—the Prepa-

ration Lab and weekly discussions—and the actual mentorship experience are compared.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were all students from the seven-county metropolitan Twin Cities area who participated in the Mentor Connection program during their junior or senior year in high school. The students selected for this program excelled in the areas of ability, motivation, and creativity and had identified a specific area of interest to pursue through a mentorship. The selection process for the Mentor Connection included a student application, two recommendations from adults (one had to be a teacher), and an interview.

In addition to filling out an application form, the students had to prepare a resumé which described their background, special activities, interests, abilities, and any special programs in which they had participated. The students also sent in a high school transcript, including any PSAT scores, class rank, and grade point average. Then the applications were reviewed by a screening committee who evaluated all applicants on the following criteria:

1. *Background* (preparation for the experience)
2. *Ability* (learning ability—grades, achievement)
3. *Clarity of intent, expectations, and motivation*
4. *Recommendations* submitted by two adults

In evaluating the applicants, the committee looked for evidence of perseverance, high motivation, good background and ability, and creativity. After the initial screening, the students were interviewed by a member of the screening committee. Since the Mentor Connection began in 1984, 188 high school students have participated in the program.

Instrumentation

This study was designed to assess the personal and academic benefits of the Mentor Connection program to participants and determine the effects of the program on the students' career development. A questionnaire, the Mentorship Inventory (MI), was sent to all who participated in the Mentor Connection over its three-year history to determine how the Mentor Connection program benefited them. The following information was requested: sex, age, project area(s) for the mentorship, number of mentors, and sex of mentor(s). Then, it asked participants to rate the benefits they gained related to the Mentor Connection classroom and mentorship experiences. These benefits were divided into three categories: personal benefits, academic benefits, and effects on career development. (The full *Mentorship Inventory* is available from the author upon request.)

The MI was developed from the literature on mentorships. It was evaluated and revised based on the judgments of experts in inventory design and mentoring processes. The three areas were divided into classroom work and mentorship so that the benefits gained from the two types of experiences could be compared. The MI was then validated by two experts in the field of gifted education. The final version of the

MI was designed to determine the benefits derived by those who participated in the mentorship, to compare the two aspects of the program, and to establish whether the independent variables (age, sex, number of semesters in the mentorship, number of years since in the mentorship, project area, number of mentors, and sex of mentors) had a significant impact on the responses.

Procedure

The MI was sent by mail to 187 mentorship students. A follow-up postcard was sent one week after the requested return date. A total of 103 questionnaires were returned for a 55% response rate. Follow-up on nonrespondents indicated no significant differences in general responses to the MI itself.

Analysis and Results

The demographic characteristics of the study sample include the number of years out of the program, the sex of the respondents, the number in each age group, and the sex of the mentors. Of the 103 respondents, 51 were out of the mentorship program less than one year, 35 were out one year, and 17 were out two years. The sex of the sample was almost equally divided between male and female students; 95 of the respondents were 17, 18, or 19 years old; 8 of them were 16, 20, or 21 years old. The majority, or 74 of the students, had only male mentors; 16 had female mentors, and 12 had both female and male mentors; one respondent did not indicate the sex of the mentor.

The data were analyzed using t-tests and ANOVAS. The t-tests were used to determine the differences between the benefits derived from the classroom and mentorship experiences. ANOVAS were computed to determine whether the independent variables (age, sex, number of semesters in the mentorship, number of years since in the mentorship, project area, number of mentors, and sex of mentors) affected the responses to the MI. Correlations were used to determine relationships among responses on the MI.

The results of the t-tests showed significant differences between benefits gained from the classroom and mentorship experiences. Significant differences ($P < .05$) are summarized in Table 1. The mentorship was significantly more effective in helping participants take risks, develop talents, learn about advanced subject matter, work independently, utilize technical skills, utilize research skills, investigate job routines and responsibilities, find out about career entrance requirements, examine lifestyles and characteristics of professionals, see how professionals interact, and make contacts and network. On the other hand, the classroom experience was significantly more effective in helping participants explore ways to find jobs.

The results of the ANOVA (Table 2) showed some relationships between the independent variables and the responses to the MI. The number of years out of the program had a significant effect on respondents' perceived values of the mentorship experience. Students just out of the program or out only one year felt the most strongly that the mentorship had helped them develop long-term friendships, achieve high

Table 1
Comparison of MI Responses to Classroom and Mentorship Aspects of the Mentor Connection

MI Responses	Classroom Work Mean	Mentorship Mean	t
Taking risks	3.47	3.99	3.64**
Developing talents	3.63	4.02	2.70*
Learning about advanced subject matter	3.28	4.22	5.48**
Working independently	3.94	4.24	2.01*
Utilizing research skills	3.61	4.23	3.74**
Utilizing technical skills	3.15	4.23	5.80**
Investigating job routines and responsibilities	3.11	4.12	5.94**
Exploring ways to find jobs	3.38	2.60	3.96**
Finding out about career entrance requirements	3.04	3.55	2.73**
Examining lifestyles and characteristics of professionals	2.92	3.95	5.00**
Seeing how professionals interact	3.18	4.25	5.80**
Making contacts and networking	3.56	3.96	2.40*

* $P < .05$

** $P < .001$

goals and standards, solve problems, and learn advanced subject matter. The same group felt the most strongly that the classroom work had helped them develop long-term friendships and make decisions. Students just out or out two years felt the most strongly that the mentorship had helped them examine career entrance requirements.

The sex and age of the participants also had an impact on the responses. Females felt much more strongly than males that the mentorship helped them look at ways to integrate career and family. The youngest participants, 16-year-olds, felt the most strongly that the classroom experience had helped them develop long-term friendships and achieve high goals and standards. The 18-year-olds felt strongly that the classroom experience helped them develop long-term friendships. The 20-year-old participants felt strongly that the class-

room work helped them achieve high goals and standards and that the mentorship helped them explore ways to find a job.

The project area for the mentorship influenced some MI responses. Participants in the fine arts, education and psychology, and business and finance areas felt strongly that the classroom experience helped them develop interpersonal skills. Participants in the architecture, environmental sciences, and engineering areas also reported that the mentorship helped them develop these same skills. Participants in the creative writing and journalism, education and psychology,

and business and finance areas felt strongly that the classroom experience helped them look at educational and career options. Finally, participants in environmental sciences, fine arts, creative writing and journalism, and business and finance felt the mentorship helped them develop communication skills.

Although the number of mentors an individual student worked with did not have any effect on responses to the MI, the sex of the mentors did influence some responses. Participants who had female mentors felt strongly that the classroom experience helped them take risks and the mentorship

Table 2
Comparative Effect of Years Out of Program upon Perceptions of the Mentorship Experience

Perceived values of mentorship program	Mean	F
Developing long-term friendships (M)		4.93*
Less than 1 year	3.30	
1 year	3.42	
2 years	2.13	
Developing long-term friendships (C)		4.95*
Less than 1 year	3.55	
1 year	3.20	
2 years	2.20	
Achieving high goals and standards (M)		3.33*
Less than 1 year	4.06	
1 year	3.97	
2 years	3.29	
Making decisions (C)		3.17*
Less than 1 year	4.09	
1 year	3.81	
2 years	3.40	
Problem solving (M)		4.11*
Less than 1 year	4.31	
1 year	4.13	
2 years	3.59	
Learning about advanced subject matter (M)		4.27*
Less than 1 year	4.52	
1 year	4.02	
2 years	3.71	
Finding out about career entrance requirements (M)		4.50*
Less than 1 year	3.86	
1 year	3.03	
2 years	3.67	

Note. (C) = Classroom work
(M) = Mentorship
**p* < .05

Table 3
Correlations Among MI Responses

	Achieving high goals and standards	Thinking critically
Raising career aspirations	.62 (M)	
Working creatively	.62 (M)	.71 (M)
Making decisions	.62 (M)	.65 (M)
Thinking critically	.66 (M)	
Solving problems	.65 (M)	.75 (C)
Learning about advanced subject matter	.63 (M)	
Working independently	.73 (M)	.66 (M)
Utilizing research skills		.64 (M)
Taking risks	.66 (M)	
Taking charge	.64 (M)	
Developing talents	.64 (M)	
Discovering talents	.66 (M)	
Communicating well with others		
Working well with others	.63 (C)	.67 (M)
Developing talents		
Discovering talents	.63 (C)	
Taking risks		
Working creatively	.62 (M)	
Utilizing research skills		
Learning about advanced subject matter	.63 (C)	
Examining ways to keep a job		
Exploring ways to find a job	.70 (C)	.69 (M)

Table 3 (cont.)

	Working independently	Utilizing technical skills
Taking charge	.60 (M)	
Working creatively	.63 (M)	
Learning about advanced subject matter	.61 (M)	
Utilizing research skills	.64 (M)	.61 (C)
Developing talents		.66 (M)
Discovering talents		.61 (M)
Solving problems		.62 (M)

Note. (C) = Classroom work
(M) = Mentorship

helped them work independently. Participants who had female mentors or both male and female mentors felt strongly that the mentorship helped them examine lifestyles and characteristics of professionals.

The results of the correlation analysis, as shown in Table 3, revealed that there was a strong relationship among certain responses. For example, a significant number of participants who felt the Mentor Connection helped them achieve high goals and standards, think critically, work independently, or utilize technical skills also stated that the program benefited them in a number of other ways. Other significant correlations were between communicating and working well with others, developing and discovering talents, taking risks and working creatively, utilizing research skills and learning about advanced subject matter, and exploring ways to find a job and examining ways to keep a job.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce previous research done on mentoring in gifted education. Programs such as the Mentor Connection provide students with the opportunity to learn about areas of interest not offered in the high school curriculum, to work with professionals in the community, and to learn about educational and career options and make decisions regarding these options. Mentorship programs also benefit them personally and academically.

According to the MI, career development was the area most affected by the mentorship. Participants felt the experience was extremely valuable because it helped them explore career options and make decisions about these options. It also gave them the opportunity to examine lifestyles and characteristics of professionals, see how they interact, and make contacts which helped them obtain a job. Without the mentor relationship, the students would not have had this guidance and direction.

Along with these benefits, the mentorship gave students a realistic idea of what a career involves. It helped participants decide whether or not to enter a particular field. For some students, the mentorship convinced them to enter a field of

study. For others, it made them decide to pursue another career. This type of career guidance is one reason mentorships are such an important part of gifted education.

The classroom experience also provided participants with career guidance. Although it did not give them specific information about careers, students felt the classroom aspect of the program helped them explore ways to find a job. It did this by teaching them interpersonal communication skills such as asking quality questions and using nonverbal communication and written communication skills such as writing a resumé and curriculum.

There are two main reasons why students just out of the program or out only one year might have felt the mentorship and classroom experiences affected them more than those out two years. First, they had a more vivid recollection of the program and how it influenced them. Second, the Mentor Connection changed after the pilot year to address the concerns identified in the first year evaluation. An Orientation Phase, during which the student, instructor, and mentor came to a common understanding of preparation, goals, expectations, and responsibilities, was added; some forms were revised; and the evaluation process was modified.

These two factors, however, do not explain why students just out or out two years felt strongly that the mentorship helped them examine career entrance requirements. This is probably because students just out have recently become aware of the requirements and those out two years are beginning to think about entering a career and so are applying what they learned during their mentorship.

The sex of the participants also influenced the MI responses. It is not surprising that females felt more strongly than males that the mentorship helped them look at ways to integrate career and family. One of the main barriers to the career achievement of gifted females has been the conflict between marital and career aspirations. Gifted women, in particular, may feel this conflict even more because of contradictory perceptions and expectations of their female roles. Society sends gifted females mixed messages about their roles as women and intellectuals. They are simultaneously reinforced for their abilities and taught that traditional female roles are more acceptable.

One guidance strategy that helps dispel this myth is to provide gifted girls with female role models who successfully integrate career and family. Although not all the female participants in this study had female mentors, the fact that the mentorship helped them look at this issue was a positive step toward overcoming this psychosocial barrier to career development. In today's society of two income families, males should also look at ways to integrate career and family.

The age as well as the sex of the participants had an effect on the MI responses. The 16- and 18-year-olds mentioned long-term friendships with mentors as an important benefit of the classroom experience. It is impossible to tell why this sample of the population felt this way without interviewing the participants in each age group. It is easier to draw con-

clusions about the responses of the 20-year-olds. Because they are thinking of entering a career soon, they are more aware of how the mentorship helped them explore ways to find a job. In addition, they may realize, in retrospect, that the classroom experience was instrumental in helping them achieve high goals and standards.

It is logical that students in the creative writing and journalism, education and psychology, and business and finance areas would feel the classroom experience helped them look at educational and career options. Since opportunities in fields such as creative writing and psychology are not always clearly defined or abundant, students in these fields might require more specific career guidance. On the other hand, careers in business and finance are so numerous and diverse that students might need career guidance to help them focus on a specific project area. The students in the fine arts, creative writing and journalism, and business and finance areas felt the mentorship helped them develop their communication skills. This makes sense since good communication skills are essential to success in these fields.

As with other independent variables, the sex of the mentors did influence some of the MI responses. According to the data, respondents were almost equally divided between males and females. However, many more students had male mentors than female or both male and female mentors. Furthermore, all but three of the sixteen students who had female mentors were females. In spite of the shortage of female mentors, the female and combination of male and female mentors had the most effect on the responses.

It is also significant that the participants felt strongly that the female mentors helped them take risks and work independently. Generally females evaluate themselves as having a lower status than men. Some even accept society's stereotypes about women and internalize these self-destructive values. The socialized need for affiliation—the need for security, love, affection, and approval—can cause women to be dependent and lack initiative (Grau, 1985). Gifted females also have the tendency to rely on external sources of control and praise. Instead of using skills or ability to explain their success, women attribute it to external sources such as luck. These attitudes can prevent gifted girls from achieving academic success and can influence their career choices.

To surmount internal barriers to achievement, gifted girls need to overcome these psychological tendencies by learning to deal with negative attitudes, recognizing and valuing their abilities and potential, and becoming more independent and assertive. Female mentors are a particularly valuable resource for gifted girls because they are role models who have achieved success by overcoming many of these internal barriers. As the study confirmed, female participants who had female mentors felt they learned more risk-taking behavior from their mentors. This is probably because women, who have had to overcome psychosocial barriers to career achievements, may be more independent, self-confident, and willing to take risks than successful men.

It is also interesting that participants who had female or both male and female mentors found the mentorship helped them examine lifestyles and characteristics of professionals. Again, the female mentors, although in the minority, had more influence than the male mentors on this response.

Finally, the relationships indicated by the correlational analysis are significant. There was a positive relationship among several personal and academic benefits and one positive relationship between two career development responses. Although the majority of correlations were between responses to the mentorship aspect of the program, some were between responses to the classroom work or to both types of experiences. The results show that many personal and academic benefits are interrelated but do not have a significant relationship to the career development benefits.

The lack of correlation between personal and academic benefits and career development benefits may be partly due to the nature of the MI itself. The benefits listed in the first two categories are closely related and the respondents are asked to rate the benefits gained from both the mentorship and classroom experiences. The third category asks the respondents to determine what they learned about careers from the Mentor Connection. These benefits, then, are not the same as those in the other two categories. Another reason for the lack of correlation may be that more respondents left the responses blank and rated the information lower in the third category than in the other two. Since the Mentor Connection is not a career exploration course, it is logical that the respondents gained more personal and academic benefits than information regarding career development.

The results of the study indicated that the students derived numerous benefits from the mentorship program. For this reason, a program such as the Mentor Connection, with both classroom and mentorship experiences, should be included in high school gifted education programs. However, since the career development benefits were greater than originally anticipated, a career guidance component might be more systematically included in the curriculum. Also, an effort should be made to recruit more female mentors so that there is not such a discrepancy between the number of male and female mentors. These changes might make mentorship programs even more beneficial to all those involved.

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