



## **Holistic Versus Instrumental Approaches to School-Based Mentoring**

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### ***Introduction***

For children who would benefit from additional emotional, educational, and social support from an adult in their community, school-based mentoring (SBM) programs are a viable option and can enhance children's functioning across a variety of domains. SBM programs rely on partnerships between schools and organizations that facilitate mentoring relationships to cater to children and youth who would certainly benefit from the positive outcomes derived from community-based matches but also require more focused, educational support (Weiss et al., 2017). According to Boys' and Girls' Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters (BGCBigS) of Edmonton and Area, SBM matches occur between a mentor and mentee, in-person or virtually, during the school day for one hour per week and are typically comprised of twenty minutes to catch up and make conversation, twenty minutes to complete homework, and twenty minutes to engage in an activity unrelated to school (BGCBigS, n.d.), though this may differ depending on the organization and personal goals or preferences. SBM may be especially effective for both mentors and mentees as it requires minimal commitment while still allowing for access to resources within the school that may assist with the match (i.e., libraries, school supplies, teacher input) (Komosa-Hawkins, 2009).

Though SBM may seem straightforward in its aim to provide both social and educational support to children, the approach that a mentor takes when engaging with their mentee appears to affect the outcomes of the match. Meltzer et al. (2020) posits that SBM matches adhere to one of two profiles. Firstly, direct engagement pathways are characterized by an instrumental focus on schoolwork or educational attainment. Here, mentors help build their mentee's engagement through providing academic support, providing them with tools for strategic learning, or increasing their motivation towards school. Meltzer et al. (2020) also highlight holistic engagement pathways that are more balanced in their emphasis on personal wellbeing versus academic success. This approach is centered around the mentor-mentee relationship itself and aims to improve a child's functioning by imparting them with non-specific skills that are applicable across a variety of both academic and personal situations (e.g., communication skills and ensuring personal wellbeing). Using this distinction as a theoretical foundation, the goal of this paper is to demonstrate that school-based matches that rely on a holistic rather than instrumental approach provide superior outcomes owing to their focus on cultivating a close relationship, which in turn fosters a more caring and positive environment in which a mentee can focus on both their personal and academic development.

## ***Literature Review***

Meltzer et al. (2020) sought to investigate each pathway listed above and how they may make an impact upon a mentee's life. The researchers identified 15 pairs of mentors and mentees who were currently engaged in an SBM program from a local Australian school. Each mentee took part in one semi-structured interview upon completion of their match, which evaluated certain aspects of their life, such as their education, future aspirations, and relationships. Here, they were asked to describe the impact that their mentor had on each of these domains throughout the match. Participants tended to describe the match profile as either direct or holistic, and the results indicated that both approaches were valued by mentees depending on their own preferences and goals within the match. However, Meltzer et al. (2020) discuss how, in some cases, it may not be possible to take a direct, instrumental approach to SBM when the match is first established, and that a holistic approach may be more effective in developing initial personal and relational skills that can then be used to facilitate success in school (i.e., proper communication or overall engagement). Indeed, creating positive associations and rapport within the match would likely help the mentee feel more comfortable and ready to engage in homework activities with their mentor. Additionally, a holistic approach may also be more effective in that it generates personal development beyond only what is applicable in school – for example, a direct approach may not as heavily influence a mentee's future aspirations or relationships outside of school, whereas those aspects of a mentee's life may be strongly considered in a holistic match. After a relationship has been established using a holistic approach, however, a direct focus on education may be useful for matches whose primary goal is to enhance school success – it is entirely possible to transition between approaches depending on the needs of the mentee and the circumstances of the match itself. It is important to note that a match built on positive associations and a trusting relationship is more likely to better serve the mentee; Lyons et al. (2021) have established that matches which are initially rated as positive by both the mentor and mentee are more likely to continue to be rated as such as they progress.

Meltzer et al. (2020) work was not without its limitations – perhaps its biggest shortcoming was the lack of a baseline semi-structured interview with mentees, which would have provided insight into the degree to which mentoring can affect certain outcomes in children over time. Additionally, the small sample size may compromise the generalizability of the results drawn. However, Meltzer et al. (2020) establishes an important distinction between SBM approaches and the circumstances in which each of them may be more effective.

Work conducted by Elledge et al. (2010) further illustrates how a more relationship-focused approach to SBM provides positive outcomes across a more diverse range of areas – namely, how SBM may mitigate bullying. Here, the researchers were interested in how a school-based lunch-buddy mentoring program between fourth and fifth graders and college students would affect hostile relationships and the degree to which mentees were bullied. From an initial sample of 343 participants across four elementary schools, the researchers selected twelve students (7 female) to be paired with twelve lunch-buddy mentors (10 female) based on both peer and teacher ratings of victimization and a hierarchical ranking of severity of bullying among the students with the highest ratings of victimization. Parents of the students who were most severely bullied were then contacted and given the opportunity to pair their child with a lunch-buddy mentor. Each participant was also matched to two control participants who were similar in age,

gender, and victimization – though one attended the same school as they did, and the other did not. Data on peer, teacher, and child perception of victimization, closeness of the mentoring relationship, and overall characteristics of the relationship (such as frequency of visits) were gathered first in the fall, and then in the spring after the SBM program had ended.

The results indicated that the lunch-buddy mentoring program was quite effective in reducing victimization. Overall, students who took part in the program were perceived as less victimized by their peers, however, neither the children themselves nor the teachers indicated a decrease in perception of victimization, which lead the authors to believe that further mentoring may be necessary to produce gains on a personal, subjective measure (Elledge et al., 2010). Additionally, children in the same-school control group but not the different-school control group were perceived as less victimized by peers, perhaps due to gains that were acquired by simply being in the lunchroom while the mentoring was taking place. Elledge et al. (2010) posit that mentees who were paired with a lunch buddy may have experienced an increase in their social standing within school, which would explain why peer ratings of victimization decreased but self-ratings did not.

Based on the results gleaned by Elledge et al. (2010), a low-commitment lunch-buddy mentoring program has the potential to benefit both the mentee, as well as other children present in the lunchroom who may also interact with the pair. The results also provide support for this paper's hypothesis, as the social nature of the lunch-buddy program lends itself extremely well to a holistic, relationship-focused approach to mentoring. Additionally, this SBM program appears to be quite unstructured, with no heavy focus on completing schoolwork, which allows the mentee to exercise the skill of autonomy in their selection of activities. The primary limitation of this study, however, is the lack of random assignment – since parents could choose to have their child paired with a mentor, there may have been a selection bias.

Keller & Pryce (2012) provide further evidence suggesting that a relationship-focused approach may be a more effective mentoring strategy. Based on teacher perceptions of students who were struggling (emotionally, socially, academically, etc.), the researchers paired 26 participants between the ages of 8-14 (69% female) with a mentor from Big Brother Big Sisters for a full academic year. During this time, the authors had observed several meetings between each pair and taken note of their style of interaction, activities engaged in, and types of support, among other features. This naturalistic observation was complemented by both baseline and closing interviews to determine how the child felt about the match, what their needs were, and whether they were met upon completion of the match.

From this data, four types of mentoring relationships emerged: teaching assistant, friend, sage/counselling, and acquaintance. The authors discuss how, in some cases, mentors who adopted the “teaching assistant” approach faced backlash from their mentee due to a lack of engagement. Additionally, this category of match may not foster the same interpersonal connection that a “friend” or “sage” match does due to the purely academic focus. These alternative approaches tended to be more well-rounded; the “friend” profile included themes of playfulness and egalitarianism, though it did not neglect schoolwork. Here, mentees can exercise social skills and shared decision-making while also gaining academic benefits. The “sage” profile is distinct from that of “friend”, as it still entails playfulness and warmth but is characterized by a “willingness to be an adult” (Keller & Pryce, 2012). This profile most closely aligns with a truly holistic approach, as the mentee is imparted with “adult skills” through a warm, trusting relationship, while also fo-

cusing on academics. Indeed, mentees who were paired in a match characterized as “friend” or “sage” reported experiencing outcomes far superior to those in “teaching assistant” matches along factors such as partnership, closeness, positive feeling, and personal support. Alternatively, “teaching assistant” matches were more likely to leave a mentee feeling disappointed with the match and wishing they were closer with their mentor (Keller & Pryce, 2012).

Limitations of Keller & Pryce (2012) include a heavy reliance on naturalistic observation, which may not fully capture the interactions between mentor and mentee and their overall match profile. Indeed, observations of each pair only occurred sporadically throughout the school year, during which each member of a pair may have behaved or spoke differently when they were aware that they were being observed. However, this study does provide strong support for the effectiveness of a holistic mentoring approach and is advantageous to Meltzer et al. (2020) in that it includes both baseline and post-treatment measures.

Kanchewa et al. (2020) sought to investigate whether the focus of SBM matches and their overall profiles had any bearing on the outcomes experienced by children. Five-hundred and sixty-five children (54% female) with a mean age of 11.2 years were randomly assigned to either a treatment group in which they were matched with a mentor, or a waitlist control group. Data pertaining to participants’ academic performance, match activities, and process measures (i.e., emotional engagement and degree of youth-centeredness) was obtained in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005. Two profiles emerged similar to those of Meltzer et al. (2020). “Instructional” matches were those that consisted of a moderate focus on academic activities and little focus on other activities or tasks. Alternatively, “balanced” matches were characterized by “high engagement in casual conversations, conversations about relationships, listening/learning, and moderate engagement in creative, indoor, and sports/athletic activities, as well as in conversations about social issues and the future” (Kanchewa et al., 2020).

Though instructional matches more commonly comprised of tutoring and homework, balanced matches included more casual, future, and relationship talk, as well as listening (Kanchewa et al., 2020). When divided into either low or high academic performance, several differences in outcomes owing to the match profile emerged. Specifically, for low-performing mentees, the match profile did not significantly affect gains. However, for high-performing mentees, being in a balanced match was associated with increased emotional engagement and a greater emphasis on the child within the relationship. The authors mention that those mentors who adopted an instrumental approach may not have spent adequate time forming a close, trusting relationship and positive rapport with their mentee, (Kanchewa et al., 2020) underscoring the importance of such features as they facilitate social and educational gains. Here, balanced matches provide mentees with an advantage over instructional matches; many of the above listed features that are common in balanced matches can be applied to both school and personal development (e.g., listening skills). Interestingly, it appears that even students who are of high academic achievement and may enjoy school could prefer a match that is aimed at forming a relationship rather than one that is geared towards their existing skillset.

Kanchewa et al. (2020) highlight some limitations of their study; first, the activities that matches could engage in were non-controlled, which leaves room for a wide range of tasks between matches that could potentially affect the processes of change experienced by mentees. Additionally, as activity reports were collected upon completion of the match by mentor reporting,

not all tasks may have been listed or fully captured as the mentors' memory could have been inaccurate – especially when considering this study ran for the course of nearly an entire school year. Nevertheless, Kanchewa et al. (2020) certainly bolster the statement that a holistic approach to mentoring better serves the mentee, especially with respect to emotional engagement.

### ***Conclusion***

As outlined by each study above, a holistic, relationship-focused approach to SBM facilitates increased social, emotional, and overall educational gains over a more instrumental or instructional approach. These benefits are clearly present in the mentees themselves, but may even extend to other children who witness a mentoring relationship in action (Elledge et al., 2010). Given the evidence presented, current and future mentors should consider adopting a holistic approach; especially throughout the initial formation of their match, as the development of a healthy relationship whose scope of focus goes beyond school work creates a solid foundation for such goals to be pursued once the mentee is comfortable and trusting. In order to fully inform mentors of different match profiles and their respective benefits to children, SBM programs themselves should also provide mentors with information on each of them so that they may select an approach that best aligns with the needs and preferences of their mentee. Both current and future mentors should value and create goals for their mentee's social, emotional, and interpersonal functioning just as they do for their educational attainment.

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