SHOESTRING PARTNERSHIPS:
A PILOT PROJECT ON COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SERVING AT-RISK YOUTH

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Abstract

This article describes the effect of a direct instruction, clinical teaching approach on the academic achievement of secondary students identified as “at-risk” for academic failure. The program had three unique aspects. First, instruction was delivered by undergraduate and fifth-year special education preservice teachers during a six-week summer school session. Second, the program was implemented without any external funding using available community resources. Third, the program was philosophically oriented away from a multicultural perspective and focused on identifying and addressing individual student needs. The program’s major outcomes were an increase of one to three grade levels in academic achievement over the six weeks for students served in the program. The implications are that clinically-based community partnerships, even those that are not funded, can serve to increase academic skills in at-risk youth, and that over-emphasis on multicultural factors in remedial programs may derail them from clinically-based remediation.

Since the report, A Nation At Risk, became public in 1983, the education establishment has launched itself into yet another era of reform efforts. Such initiative is nothing new to American education. Since the advent of the 20th century, there has been continual promotion and debate about reforming education. This debate, as always, reflects one’s vision of what education should be and, in a larger sense, what the nation should be.
During the past few years, one of the most publicized of the current reform efforts has been the formation of *partnerships*. These partnerships can take various forms, but all have a school/educational base. Thus, there has been the development of business/industry-school partnerships, higher education-public school partnerships, and community-school partnerships. Many of these partnerships involve large projects, some of which are subsidized through public or private-sector grants for hundreds of thousands of dollars. But, are these dollars, and the regulations that accompany them, necessary to form effective educational partnerships? In a small Mississippi town, a successful partnership was implemented on a “shoestring.” This partnership was targeted toward increasing the academic achievement levels of at-risk adolescents.

Students at risk for academic failure have, from the mid-1980s to the present, been the focus of significant research and intervention efforts (Reynolds, 1988). It has been estimated that over 80% of the federal education budget is directed toward programs for special education and economically and academically disadvantaged children and youth (Thornton, 1995). These students try the patience of their parents, tax the abilities of their teachers, and strain the resources of their schools. Estimates of the number of at-risk students in the nation’s schools range as high as 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). While programs such as Teach for America (1993) and the Mississippi Teacher Corps (Chambless, Mullins, Chambless, & Thompson, 1997) have attempted to address this overwhelming need, the problem has been little affected. Providing academically skilled individuals as teachers, role models, and facilitators of future education leaders has had minimal impact on the participating school districts’ “bottom line” (i.e. the measured academic achievement of students). Several reasons can be identified for the limited success of such programs including: (a) a lack of focus on organizational culture, (b) the systematic nature of the problems related to academic risk, and (c) a flawed assumption that high intellect or superior academic performance translates into effective interpersonal teacher skills. However, the major problem with such programs is that they were conceived, designed, developed, and implemented in isolation, with little or no participation from those persons most directly affected by them.

Collaboration, participation, and the involvement of the primary stakeholders during all phases of a program are critical factors in that program’s success and overall impact (Mann, Blackbourn, & Scafitti, 1994; Rigden, 1991). Furthermore, Burbidge (1994) stated that broad-based participation forms the foundation for quality improvements in school, community, or government programs. In addition, Hitchcock (1994) held that in successful collaborative relationships, participants are equal partners, rather than a single participant assuming the role of “parent” or director. Clearly, a partnership that involves all stakeholders from its inception facilitates the probability for ongoing success.

Successful programs for at-risk children and youth must also employ instructional methods that are supported by research and that are effective in practice. The clinical teaching process has been identified as one such method (Horton & Lovitt, 1989; Horton, Lovitt, & Christiansen, 1991; Smith & Lovitt, 1975). This method involves individual assessment of student needs; the setting of long-term and short-term goals; prescriptive direct instruction based on a student’s needs or goals; and ongoing, frequent monitoring of student progress. Clinical teaching has been demonstrated to be a viable method for enhancing the academic skills of students with mild disabilities (Meese, Overton, & Whitlefield, 1993). Since at-risk students have been shown to exhibit similar academic attributes as students with mild disabilities (Alley & Deshler, 1979; Deshler, 1978; Deshler & Schumaker, 1986; Deshler, Schumaker, Alley, Warner, & Clark, 1980), a logical extension is that the clinical teaching method would have a positive impact on the achievement of at-risk students.

This article reports the effect of a six-week, summer intervention program on the academic performance of at-risk adolescents. The program, known as a “shoestring partnership,” was based on the clinical teaching model and evolved from a collaborative partnership among those stakeholders most directly involved and most likely to benefit from the success of such students.
Shoestring Partnerships

Shoestring partnerships are, as the name implies, partnerships among various entities that are run on a “shoestring” budget. The Starkville, Mississippi, Shoestring Partnership, which was implemented during the summer of 1996, included the entities of: Mississippi State University (MSU), the First Presbyterian Church, the Starkville Public School District, and Project FAST (For A Safer Today), a school district-affiliated program for at-risk children and youth. None of these four entities had budgeted any funds for the summer tutoring program. Thus, volunteer collaboration was an essential theme of program development. Each entity had its own role as it contributed to the whole program. These roles are described below.

Mississippi State University

The College of Education at MSU offers summer practica experiences for students preparing to enter the field of special education. These practica blend on-campus training in assessment and pedagogy with field-based teaching experiences. MSU’s role, through a secondary-level special education methods/practicum course, was to provide “free labor” in the form of 10 upper division and post-bachelors students who were enrolled in the course for the summer semester. In addition to supplying the “manpower” to conduct the tutoring of the at-risk youth, MSU, through the methods course, also provided intensive training of these tutors (known as “mentors” during the shoestring partnership) in targeting and assessing academic deficits. The mentors were also trained in a direct instruction method of addressing these academic deficits in a remedial fashion. Thus, MSU not only supplied mentors for the project, the mentors provided were highly trained in a clinical teaching approach.

Project FAST

A school district affiliated program named Project FAST had been in operation for almost two years working with at-risk children and youth. Project FAST offered these students and their parents the opportunity to participate in activities ranging from academic tutoring to recreational basketball to a dance group known as the FASTsteppers. The MSU methods course coordinator had worked with Project FAST during the academic year by providing mentors for certain activities such as in-school tutoring. Even though Project FAST had no plans to provide tutoring services for at-risk youth for the summer months, it did have a valuable link to the parents and the students who could benefit from such a program. The Project FAST staff, with cooperation from the administration and counselors at the local high school, was able to ascertain the primary areas of deficit (e.g., reading, math) for each student. Once actual instruction commenced, this information was invaluable in assisting the MSU mentors in immediately pinpointing specific skill areas for further diagnosis and assessment.

First Presbyterian Church

A critical element of the summer remediation project was addressed in the form of the First Presbyterian Church of Starkville. As the pool of at-risk students emerged during the spring, it became apparent that a site was needed in which tutoring could be implemented on a daily basis. Construction, regularly scheduled Summer School classes, and other logistics prevented the program from being housed at a school district site. Thus, the community at-large had to be explored for possible venues. The Project FAST coordinator approached the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church about the possibility of using that facility to house the summer program for two hours per day, Monday through Friday, over a six-week period. Once approval from the pastor was obtained, the MSU methods course coordinator provided him with projected numbers of mentors and students (10 from each group), the specific hours of operation (8:00-10:00 a.m.), and the nature of the instruction that would be provided. The
pastor decided that the top floor of the church’s education building, which had enough space and classrooms where the mentors and their students could work in pairs or in small groups, would suffice. Since no other activities were scheduled by the church for the education building during the hours reserved for the summer tutoring program, both mentors and students were provided with a quiet, comfortable area in which attention could be focused on improvement of targeted academic needs.

Starkville School District

A final, important link to the overall success of the shoestring partnership was offered by the counselors and administrators at Starkville High School. As the pool of at-risk students evolved from contacts through the Project FAST office, counselors at the high school identified (based on standardized test results and student performance) general areas of academic need (e.g., reading, math) for which each individual student would benefit from tutoring. In addition, the administrators at the high school provided the MSU mentors with the projected fall academic schedule for each student and materials from a targeted fall class that would, based on each student’s deficits, be the most problematic for him/her in the upcoming school year. Thus, if a student’s major area of deficit was, for example, reading, a course requiring substantial amounts of reading (such as world history) was targeted as problematic and the mentor was supplied with the world history text from the class the student would be entering in the fall. This allowed the mentors to not only work on a specific area of deficit (e.g., reading), but to also acquaint the student with material that he/she would be using in a specific class in the ensuing school year.

The Mentors

Ten students from MSU served as one-on-one mentors in the Starkville Shoestring Partnership. Of these 10 individuals, one was a certified speech therapist seeking special education certification, three were certified regular educators who were assigned to special education classes in their respective school districts, and six were upper division undergraduates who were within two semesters of completing both degree and certification requirements in special education.

For two weeks prior to their tutoring assignment, this cohort of MSU students was provided with intensive, day-long training in clinical teaching methods. In addition, they were taught interventions appropriate for secondary-level students in need of remedial work in reading, math, and writing. Follow-along assistance was provided by the methods course coordinator during the actual tutoring sessions.

The Students

Ten academically at-risk students were taught by the mentors during the Shoestring Partnerships. Of the 10, all of whom were African-American, two were males and eight were females. Their average age was 15.3 years. All were attending high school, with four (all females) receiving special education services.

Tutoring Method

The tutoring method used in the summer project was based on a clinical teaching model that included the components of (a) assessment of targeted academic needs, (b) development of instructional goals, and (c) daily and direct instruction and evaluation of progress. Each of these components is discussed briefly below.
Assessment

Based on identified areas of academic needs, each mentor administered an appropriate individualized, norm-referenced achievement test (e.g., Woodcock Reading Mastery Test) to his/her assigned student (who was referred to as a client during the tutoring sessions). To fulfill requirements for the secondary-level methods course, each mentor had to administer one academic test battery, one career interest survey, and a measure of achievement attribution (which yielded information regarding student motivation). Once these tests had been given and the results tabulated, each mentor further probed his/her client’s abilities by directly using the class material supplied by the high school. If a client, for example, was deficient in math, the mentor, using a sampling of problems from the math text the client would use the ensuing fall, would assess how the client’s performance level matched future curricular expectations. Thus, each mentor had standardized and curriculum-based measurements of his/her client’s performance level.

Goals

In a six-week period of tutoring, two hours per day, it would be fruitless to construct a comprehensive set of instructional goals, most of which could not be addressed. Therefore, each mentor was given instructions to design no more than two academic goals to be worked on over the six weeks (in fact, most mentors targeted a single goal). Goals were stated in measurable terms either by using projected academic achievement (e.g., “Johnny will increase his reading comprehension skills to mid-fifth-grade level”) or pre-established criterion (e.g., “Given a probe of reading comprehension from her history text, Suzie will respond with 90% accuracy”).

Instruction

Instruction was conducted using one-on-one mentor-client dyads or small groups (some dyads decided, on their own, to combine if they were working on shared goals). All instruction was implemented directly using a variety of approaches in which the mentors had been trained. Mentor-mentor and mentor-course coordinator consulting was implemented regularly to reinforce instruction in use or to design new methods to address specific learning problems that surfaced during instruction. Most instruction was based on a two-fold construct: (a) direct instruction in an academic area of need, and (b) use of actual curricular materials as the foundation of instruction. Mentors were allowed to deviate or adjust the curricular materials based on their professional judgment, and many did so routinely, especially with lower functioning clients.

Field Trips

In addition to the daily tutoring sessions, field trips were arranged for the purpose of showing the clients occupations in which reading, mathematics, knowledge of science, and the ability to write all contribute to vocational success. The field trips included visits to: the College of Veterinary Medicine at MSU, the Starkville Daily News, the computer laboratory of MSU’s College of Education, Columbus (MS) Air Force Base, and the virtual reality laboratory of MSU’s Engineering Research Center.

Cost of transportation was borne by the methods course coordinator and was reimbursed by MSU’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction, with the MSU mentors serving as van drivers when necessary. In all, four out of the five field trips required van rentals at a nominal cost. The vans were obtained from MSU’s Transportation Division. This Division worked closely with the methods course coordinator (who also arranged the field trips) in supporting the efforts of the summer program.
Results

The major results of the Shoestring Partnership for the 10 clients served were that for six-weeks in program, academic gains in reading, mathematics, and written language ranged from one to three grade levels. The standardized achievement pre-test grade-level performance mean across all 10 clients was 4.54. The posttest performance mean of 5.86 demonstrated a significant achievement gain ($t = 4.39$, $p < .005$, $df = 9$). Thus, for example, one client, an 11th grader, who pretested at the fifth grade level in reading, at the end of the six-week program, posttested at the eighth grade level. This quantitative outcome in improved academics was the chief aim of the program. The goal was to get the clients “caught up” by reducing the discrepancy between their actual grade placement and their assessed academic achievement levels.

While many current efforts in working with at-risk youth place development of self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-confidence ahead of promoting academic achievement, the approach taken with the Starkville Shoestring Partnership was to target academic achievement first and foremost. The philosophy of this program stemmed from the notion that only when actual academic achievement is realized by each client does improved self-confidence, higher levels of self-esteem, and goal-focused self-actualization follow.

In fact, clients who, at the beginning of the six weeks, had very few positive perceptions about school or learning in general, toward the end of the program were uttering comments such as, “I can’t wait for school to start!” When asked to explain why they felt that their clients had made such significant improvement on the posttests, the MSU mentors attributed the phenomenon to improved academic skill the clients had acquired through the clinical teaching sessions and increased client self-confidence evidenced on the posttests. This self-confidence was observed, as stated by one mentor, when, on the posttests, the clients “did not give up as easily on items they did not know immediately.”

Discussion

This article presented evidence supporting the positive impact of a collaborative intervention program for at-risk youth based on the clinical teaching model. The gains in academics achieved by the clients in this program were comparable to, or exceeded, gains achieved by similar students in other, more costly programs. While partnerships and the clinical teaching method formed the basis for the program, two characteristics of a philosophical nature set this program apart from others that target improving outcomes for at-risk students. It may be that these characteristics played a significant role in the program’s effectiveness.

First, expectations for client performance were high and the effect of academic achievement on long-term outcomes was emphasized. In essence, mentors and clients in the program were not focusing on the “lowest common denominator” as their goal. The need for a high level of academic ability as a precursor for success in an emerging high-tech world was ingrained in the clients. Basically, to expect less than absolute academic mastery from the program participants was tantamount to the theft of their future success.

Secondly, unlike many programs for at-risk students, the current project de-emphasized multiculturalism. Instead, it targeted commonalities among all individuals in terms of learning and motivational characteristics. In this program, mentors were instructed to place the individual needs of each client ahead of race or gender. In addition, mentors were asked to hold themselves and their clients to the highest expectations. The underlying theme was that students, regardless of their race, gender, or even degree of “at-riskness,” are more similar than they are different. And, certainly, the academic achievement level needed to be successful in today’s world is indiscriminate and applies to all. Characteristics of gender, race, and disability do not define “what a person is” and when the skills needed for success in school and work are considered, unity among all students becomes the prevailing perspective. Expectations tainted by an overemphasis on “diversity” may carry a racial, if not racist, undertone and fos-
ter a bias that will ultimately work to the detriment of minority students and follow them throughout their lives. Indeed, Popkewitz (1995) stated that some programs for at-risk youth, in their training, draw distinctions between the “normal” child who succeeds in school and the child of color who becomes the “other” child. In targeting the mastery of specific academic skills and focusing on similarities rather than differences, programs for all students can facilitate the achievement of a unified vision of lifelong success.

The shoestring partnership depicted herein sought to do what American schools and the educational establishment has seemingly failed to do—democratize rather than socialize educational opportunity. The latter perspective, prominent in the postmodern era, views students as separate group members who largely differ in their educational needs and, therefore, need different learning experiences founded on a philosophy of social constructs. The former viewpoint is based on the notion that schools exist for academic instruction, not social experimentation; that students, regardless of their backgrounds, are more alike than different and have the same basic learning needs; and that only through rigorous application of principles of teaching can the ultimate outcome, equal opportunity for the pursuit and the attainment of liberty, be achieved. As expressed by Erasmus in 1529, “. . . let us press and yet again press, that by learning, by repeating, by diligent listening, the [student] may feel . . . carried onward towards his [her] goal” (Woodward, 1964, p. 209). Jefferson, in 1814, summarized the same ideal by stating, “It is highly interesting to our country, and it is the duty of its functionaries to provide that every citizen in it should receive an education proportioned to the condition and pursuits of his life” (Conant, 1963, p. 113).

A final point worthy of consideration is that when dealing with at-risk students, specificity may be the key. Programs that are all encompassing in their goals, designed without stakeholder participants, may end up being “a mile wide and an inch deep” which, in turn, can result in an impact that is negligible at best and diluted at worst. Setting clear goals, focusing on these goals, and designing interventions to achieve them can minimize wasted effort and maximize instructional effectiveness.

Future research, addressing some of the limitations of this study, should examine the effect of clinical, data-based, direct instruction across a variety of student groups and settings (much of this foundation has been laid by Adams & Engelmann, 1996). Application in regular, as well as special education, classes would be a key dimension in the present era of inclusion. In addition, longitudinal studies should be conducted to determine postsecondary outcomes of at-risk students involved in clinical programs as compared to those students taught through other methods. Finally, the shoestring partnership concept should be field-tested in a variety of venues, urban, suburban, and rural, in providing services for at-risk children and youth.

References


The authors would like to express their appreciation to Greg Jones, former coordinator of Project FAST; Leon Clark and King David Rush of Starkville High School; Reverend Reg Parsons of the First Presbyterian Church of Starkville, MS; and to an outstanding group of mentors: Kara Aldy, Amanda Bray, Chriissy Caraway, Kaye Dorroh, Randy Holt, Betsy Jernigan, Stacey Moore, Cora Straight, and Stacey Woods.