

Igniting the Spirit of Hope, Healing and Discovery Through Peer-Mentoring

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Trauma in our at-risk youth community is a growing concern and needs revisioning if we are to expect positive transformations. This unique peer-mentoring program is specifically designed to ignite hope, healing and discovery which transforms youth that are on probation with the justice system. The outcomes are humbling and transforming, with youth better able to love themselves, connect with others, and find hope for their future. The qualitative research over the past 16 years shows remarkable change in the youth's ability to form intimate relationships, focus on school, and improve their outlook on life. Mentors and youth that have been in the program in the past have been interviewed, to better understand how and why this program is so effective. They all express leaving the program with more optimism and resilience.

Keywords: High-risk youth, peer-mentoring, non-judgmental, transformation

Introduction

Youths from high-risk settings are often labeled based on their behavior, which leads to cycles of negative stigmatization and punitive interventions. Traditional behavioristic approaches used in schools, courts, and therapy have shown limited success in fostering long-term positive change. Our peer mentoring program offers an innovative approach by following the principles from Martin Buber's (1958) "I and Thou" philosophy to view the youths with a humanistic and spiritual model.

The program is a 10-week peer-mentorship program that connects youth on probation with college student volunteers and who aspire to be educators. The peer mentoring program aims to ignite the spirit of hope, healing, and discovery. This study utilizes their first-hand testimonies and perspectives as empirical evidence to explore how our peer mentoring programs have impacted youth over the years. Both youths and mentors emphasized the importance of forming nonjudgmental perspectives, which transformed their perception of the self, others, and the world. Through its emphasis on the humanistic principles of mutuality and vulnerability, this research strongly encourages school, justice, and therapeutic systems to create a non-judgmental environment for youth.

Literature Review

Youth from high-risk settings are traditionally seen as pathological delinquents and negatively stigmatized based on their behaviors. They are often labeled as disruptive, disrespectful, or simply bad. The phrase 'high-risk' itself already has a judgmental connotation that leads to a myopic perception of these youths. While this issue must be seen as the complex interactions between individuals, families, schools, and society, Te Riele

(2006) argues that the act of labeling youth as 'at risk' will only simplify the issue by merely focusing on their personal attributes or behavior. Moreover, Becker's (1963) labeling theory argues that labeling will reinforce the individuals' adoption of deviant labels and stereotypes, which leads to second deviations or chronic criminal behaviors. Thus, during this critical developmental stage of adolescence, these youths form their identity and integrity based on the pathologizing labels bestowed upon them.

For decades, however, schools, judicial institutions, and therapeutic practices have actively focused on label policing and treatments that focus on punishment, reward, and control rather than rehabilitation, nurturing, listening, and guiding dialogue to bring about a behavior change. In classroom settings, teachers and administrators view high-risk youths as a serious threat to classroom etiquette and respond with punitive approaches that quickly escalate. Starting from in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS), some youths are forced to move to alternative schools, lockdown facilities, or drop out of school (Peterson, 2020).

A common approach used on disruptive youths is to remove them from their classrooms or place them in alternative schools. While it may be helpful to temporarily separate challenging youths from other peers, there must be a better way than to permanently separate youths from the learning environment. Removing them from the classroom only deprives educators of an opportunity to truly comprehend, understand, and engage in rehabilitating challenging youths. This focus may only temporarily resolve the immediate problem, but it does not bring about a positive lasting change in the lives of youth who live in high-risk settings. This cycle will only lead to "cynicism, self-indulgence, competition, and despair that is

so much a part of today's educational culture" (Peterson, 2020, p. 31). The legalistic-institutional approach to changing behaviors adopts a similar attitude toward challenging youths: to punish and remove them from their community. Recent data have indicated a significant decrease in juvenile arrest rates, but America still imprisons far too many juvenile delinquents (Mendel, 2023). Research clearly indicates that incarceration is an ineffective approach to rehabilitating youth and ensuring public safety. In fact, incarceration only results in negative outcomes such as high recidivism (Gilman et al., 2015; Gatti et al., 2009; Mendel, 2011), low high-school/college re-enrollment rates (Aizer & Doyle, 2015; Cavendish, 2014; Development Services Group, Inc. 2019) and long-term harm to their physical and mental health (Barnert et al., 2017; Teplin et al., 2005; Aalsma et al., 2016). The ever-present dependence on incarceration "ignores the lessons of emerging adolescent development research" and "harms their future progress in education and employment" (Mendel, 2023, p. 28).

The educational and legalistic institutional systems aim to provide intervention and rehabilitation programs; the most common and prominent practice is therapy for juvenile offenders. Many evidence-based programs and therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Multisystemic therapy, have proven effective (Abell Foundation et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2008; Blanckstein et al., 2020). However, these interventions tend to only effectively lead to short-term behavioral modification. "Most conventional at-risk programs are designed to change the behavior of the youth through rewards, incentives, and punishment" (Peterson, 2020, p. 32). Again, the traditional therapeutic approach does not resolve the struggle to fundamentally and existentially understand the lived experience of youth in high-risk settings. We, the so-called experts in the fields, concentrate on modulating external variables and interventions to change them from the outside. However, can we approach our youth, not from a top-down, authoritative approach, but from the inside-out? Furthermore, what can be done to truly understand their identity and integrity without manipulating and diagnosing them using labels and treatments?

Program: An Alternative Approach

As one small spark can lead to a powerful forest fire and our peer mentoring program aims to ignite a spark in the youth that radically challenges their long-held deformative beliefs about their identities and guides them in discovering new and transformative identities. The program is a 10-week peer-mentoring program that connects college students with youths from high-risk settings who are on probation with a Juvenile Justice Court. These youths, whom we call 'SPARK youth', are between the ages of 11 and 18 and have appeared at least once in the juvenile courts, and many have served time in youth detention centers.

The college students, whom we call 'SPARK mentors', are in pre-service teacher programs such as elementary/secondary education or speech pathology. "Through collaboration with local Juvenile Courts, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the College of Education, alongside other local establishments, a mentoring program was created that demonstrates a radically alternative approach to working with both at-risk youth and aspiring teachers" (Peterson, 2020, p. 32)

This collaborative program has a fundamental theoretical framework based on the holistic and spiritual principles of Martin Buber's "I and Thou" (1958). The central tenet of Buber's writing is that human existence may be defined by how we engage in dialogue with each other, the world, and God. "In the context of Buber's work, the desire to manage, mold, and manipulate falls away to a more compassionate and communal way of being and caring for each other" (Peterson, 2020, p. 34). This radical way of interaction is directly embodied in how the program's curriculum is formulated. While most of the youths' experiences with adults center around critiquing their behaviors and being compelled or coerced to change their behaviors, we do not try to change them using traditional behavioral modification methods. Mentors are asked to avoid counseling them. Mentors are asked to see the SPARK youth with awe and spirit—as "sacred beings." This practice of mutuality challenges our SPARK mentors to shift their perception of themselves, youths, and the world around them, creating a non-judgmental, safe environment that invites more meaningful opportunities for open dialogue and contemplation on one's life.

Moreover, to further dissolve the disconnect between SPARK youth and mentors, we utilize what is known as the "3rd" thing. The "3rd thing" refers to any elements within the program that encourage SPARK youth and mentors to practice opening up and being vulnerable with each other. For 10 weeks, we do different activities designed to create a playful, energetic, and healing environment. Starting each meeting with an icebreaker, each week encompasses activities such as African therapeutic drumming, clay art, team building, mask painting, and college tours. Many of the activities are new not only to SPARK youths but also to SPARK mentors as well. This means mentors are not all-knowing, authoritative teachers to give instructions to the youth. Rather, SPARK youths and mentors can form mutual relationships where they collaboratively learn the activities together.

Lastly, the pinnacle of our curriculum is leading the SPARK youths and mentors to an inner sanctuary of relationships through the "cosmos." The cosmos is a visual representation and personal narrative that shares people or events that have influenced and shaped their lives. Each week, SPARK mentors openly share the deepest and sincere essence of their experiences and relationships—both positive and negative, joy and great pain. This explicitly challenges the presenter to be open and vulnerable

to what others might think and say. "It is not to be a mere performance but a sharing [...] stories of brokenness, pain, despair, incest, rape, cutting, abandonment, failure, physical and emotional problems, triumph, success, love, and hope" (Peterson, 2020, p. 35). Thus, this humanistic practice of mutuality and vulnerability creates a non-judgmental, safe environment.

Hope, Healing, and Discovery

Based on these foundations of philosophy and curriculum, the program provides a culture that ignites a sense of hope, discovery, and healing in both SPARK youth and college students. This section will provide theoretical and conceptual frameworks to define further and explain each element.

Hope is not merely blind optimism or wishful thinking. Rather, it is "becoming aware that every moment of life offers renewed possibility for the future—such as possibilities to join in solidarity to fight against conditions of trauma and oppression" (Gupta, 2022, p. 8). Unfortunately, many of our SPARK youths are constantly stigmatized for their past behaviors and lives, which prevents them from being fully present. SPARK program provides a safe haven that is separated from their past world and focuses on the here and now. Moreover, dialogue with college students and campus tours invite our youth to consider the possibility of academic advancement. We let our SPARK youths know that academic advancement is not reserved only for "special ones" but is open to those who want to pursue their passion. One of the SPARK youths told us, "If I wasn't in this program, I know I would be in jail."

Discovery can be defined as revelation or re-envisioning of the past. As Rollo May (1983) wrote in *The Discovery of Being*, "genuine encounter with another person always shakes the self-world relationship" (p. 12). May further argues that as the person experiences his existence, one can truly discover one's being. When SPARK mentors reveal their past narratives, it invites the SPARK youths to reflect on their own past self-world relationships. As they critically contemplate their past selves and experiences, this can reveal their real identities and integrity of being. It is the journey of discovering the unknown into being known.

Lastly, healing in psychotherapy does not exclusively refer to full recovery from past trauma or mental illness. This is because the ultimate goal of therapy is not removing symptoms but re-visioning symptoms. Buber (1958) famously stated that "All real living is meeting" (p. 11), and Fredman (2002) commented that "the basic element of healing [...] is healing through meeting" (p. 14). Similarly, Carl Roger (1957), a founder of Person-centered therapy, stated that "significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship" (p. 96). This requires unconditional positive regard for that someone, which refers to caring for your client's lifeworld (or internal frame of reference) in a congruent and genuine way. The

philosophy and curriculum of this program are fundamentally based on vulnerability. The cosmos challenges the presenter to be utterly vulnerable to the audience. This element of vulnerability opens doors for healing to take place for both SPARK mentors and youths.

However, despite these theoretical conceptualizations and past research papers written from an academic perspective (Peterson, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2020), there hasn't been prior research that systematically interviewed former SPARK youths and mentors. As this program aims to offer "first-hand experience to become involved in a truly challenging and emerging, open-ended adventure" (Peterson, 2020, p. 36), their first-hand testimonies and narratives are significant. Based on these empirical findings, this research aims to openly explore how the program has impacted and influenced SPARK youths and mentors. It will not attempt to confirm whether the program ignites hope, healing, and discovery in youth and mentors; rather, it seeks to find important insights that youth and mentors have learned from participating in the program and thematize them. Thus, through systematic investigation, this research aims to capture the impact and significance of the program based on the subjective narratives of program participants.

Methodology

The researcher conducted group interviews with people who have completed the program as either college mentors or SPARK students. The recruiter used the most recent contact information of participants collected while they were at the program. This research conducted interviews with five SPARK students and six college students separately.

The researcher interviewed one group consisting of five SPARK students and the other group consisting of six college students on separate dates. In a group setting, participants were asked open-ended questions related to the participant's experience with the SPARK program. The questions were not designed to confirm themes of hope, healing, and discovery. After the interview, their responses were transcribed into the transcript. Then, the 'codebook' thematic analysis was conducted with three separate sets of transcripts: SPARK youth, SPARK mentors, and a combination of SPARK youths and mentors.

This research utilizes the coding software Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti supports functions such as co-occurrence code, query tool, and network view to support data analysis and generate visual representations such as concept maps, world frequency clouds, or tree maps (Ronzani et al., 2020). However, the frequency of certain words or phrases does not necessarily equate with the prevalence or importance of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research opposes using functions like AI coding, Sentimental Analysis, or any visual representation to display the frequency of specific codes. Thus, this research will only utilize the function of code-

labeling and network view as the initial stages of analyzing patterns in the dataset.

Results

Three themes emerged from the merged transcripts from SPARK youths and SPARK mentors. These themes include (a) Non-judgmental, (b) Connection on a deeper level, and (c) From I-oriented to Others-oriented. Both SPARK youths and SPARK mentors emphasized the significance of practicing a nonjudgmental perspective. This creates a nonjudgmental environment that enables a connection to be made on a deeper level. This will lead one to transcend from an I-oriented life to pursue an Others-oriented life.

Both SPARK youths and mentors had similar experiences and feelings of being judged, mistreated, and abused. One SPARK youth described their daily interactions as, “Everybody, you know, judges you by your cover” and “I felt like I was gonna get judged automatically.” One SPARK mentor recalled one’s teaching experience: “I think kids have this presumption that teachers aren’t humans, like, they’re not going to make mistakes, you know, they have it together.”

However, SPARK youths and SPARK mentors emphasized how learning to be non-judgmental was a significant factor impacting their lives. Through the program, the mentors learn and practice nonjudgmental perspectives to be nonjudgmental people and form a nonjudgmental environment. SPARK mentors described this learning process as “it’s just helped me to just accept people for who they are” and “After you’ve done your cosmos, and all of a sudden it’s like, they aren’t seeing you anymore with the label.”

This has also challenged the youth to learn to adopt a nonjudgmental perspective (“Get to know people before I judged them”) and be open to interaction with new people (“Whenever I had come here, I, like, I learned that there were people that were interested in my genuine life”). Eventually, youths described the environment as “I was in the same place and where I could be me” and “Feeling like I was in a safe place and somewhere where I wasn’t being judged based on my past or what I’ve done and what I did to get in there. That helped me a whole lot.”

Through the program, both SPARK youths and mentors expressed their connection on a deeper level through stories and activities. SPARK mentors argued that their interactions with the youth offer “an opportunity to express and share their story, you know, who they are, let them open up, get to understand them a little bit better.” One SPARK youth shared how the cosmos helped one to “realize that I wasn’t the only person hurting, that there were a lot more people’s pain.”

Also, activities such as African drumming, team building, and banquets were special moments for both SPARK youths and mentors. One mentor described one’s experience in the trust walk session as “Like I felt safe with a kid I didn’t know. And I had trust in a kid that I didn’t know before,

you know, two weeks prior to that. And he had trusted me. He trusted me to spin him around and guide him to the other side and guide him back.” This connection on a deeper level allowed both SPARK youths and mentors to feel like they were becoming a family. One of the SPARK youths recalled one’s time in the banquet as “whenever you do that near in a group setting, like, it spreads. And then, everybody becomes a family,” and one other SPARK youth agreed, “Yeah, seeing everybody happy and smiling, and everybody was just laughing and having the greatest time. Like, that was, it was beautiful.” SPARK mentor also described one’s immersion in the banquet as “Everybody at that moment [...] like everybody became family.”

Through semi-structured interviews with SPARK youth and mentors who directly experienced the impact of the program, we were able to identify several common themes. Specifically, both SPARK youths and mentors agreed on how the program’s non-judgmental perspectives/people/environment, and connection on a deeper level are manifested. They both argued that this motivated many of them to shift from an I-oriented to an Others-oriented life, which focuses on helping others in need. It can be argued that the program enables participants to practice care for and concern for others before self-interest.

Discussion

This study has a few limitations that must be considered. As this research conducts codebook thematic analysis, one can argue that the methodology and findings are on the murky border between confirming the predetermined hypothesis (identifying hope, healing, and discovery) and being open to exploring different themes. However, as mentioned, this study aims to expand on previous theoretical frameworks and research while valuing the researcher’s reflexivity in code and theme generation. Future studies could utilize other qualitative methodologies, such as reflexive thematic analysis or listening guides, to explore more flexible and less predetermined qualitative insights.

Conclusion

This research explored several significant insights into the program based on first-hand testimonies from SPARK youth and mentors (college students). Both SPARK youths and mentors emphasized the importance of forming nonjudgmental perspectives that enable one to build connections at a deeper level. As a result, the participants of the program experienced a transformation of their views on the self, others, and the world. Through this glance at the program, this research strongly encourages the school, justice, and therapeutic systems to practice the humanistic principles of mutuality and vulnerability to create a non-judgmental environment for youth.

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