

TEACHERS' INFORMAL MENTORING ON ENGAGEMENT OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Tin Nilar Aye¹, Aung Lin ²

Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to study teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. Quantitative method and qualitative methods were used in this study. The questionnaire included two parts; at-risk students' perception on teachers' informal mentoring and their engagement. Teachers' informal mentoring portion was modified by the researcher under the guidance of supervisor, and at-risk students' engagement portion was based on Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) and refined under the guidance of supervisor. The reliability coefficients (the Cronbach's alpha) were 0.92 for teachers' informal mentoring and 0.89 for at-risk students' engagement. One hundred and ninety-four Grade 9 students from Basic Education High Schools in Hlaing Township participated in the study. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANNOVA and interviews were used in exploring the levels of students' perceptions on teachers' informal mentoring and engagement of at-risk students. The teachers in Hlaing Township often performed their mentoring on at-risk students. Therefore, their students' engagement is moderately high. After that, in comparing the students who receive teachers' informal mentoring and those who are not receiving, the students who receive teachers' informal mentoring is higher engaged in their learning than those who are not receiving. In qualitative findings, the information from interview questions were complementary to the quantitative findings. Therefore, educators and education policy makers should consider the findings of the research work in improving teachers' informal mentoring and students' engagement.

Keywords: informal mentoring, at-risk students' engagement

Introduction

Education is productive and beneficial for a person. Education can transform a person to be a better person in a social well-being. Education can produce successful people. Most successful people have a caring adult who helped them face the challenges of life when they were in their youth. This caring person may have been a person who have a special interest in them and served as a guide for them. These successful people cannot achieve success without the help of this mentor figure. Throughout the history, a mentor has been defined as a trusted counselor or guide. They have the ability to profoundly impact those with whom they are able to form emotional bonds (O'Shea, 2014).

Mentoring is essential in education especially for at-risk students. At-risk students are those who hinder academic success and these lead to drop-out. Students who are at-risk may need a caring adult to serve as a secondary attachment figure in place of parents or family who may have failed to provide adequate developmental support connections. (Van Ryzin, 2010). If teachers are able to form informal mentoring relationships with students who are at-risk, then students may become behaviorally, cognitively and emotionally engaged in learning.

In education, the success of the students depends upon the teachers' pedagogical knowledge, instructional strategies and the relationship between teachers and students. The effect of the teacher-student relationship has the effect on the engagement of students, especially at-risk students. Students and teacher relationships create school environments that can facilitate student engagement and reduce rates of dropout (Lee & Burkam, 2003, as cited in Van 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students.

¹ Tutor, Department of Educational Theory, Yangon University of Education

² Dr, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Theory, Yangon University of Education

Significance of the Study

In our country today, there is a huge emphasis on education. It plays an important part in social and personal advancement. Therefore, in our country, EFA program is implemented all over the country. However, students' drop-out rate rises because of the socio-economic status of the people. It is recognized by the MoE as a major issue to be solved. According to NESP data, the secondary students' drop-out rate is higher than any others.

In order for teachers to help students who are at-risk, it is important to first understand the factors that lead to students' difficulties in school. Students who are at-risk often arrive at school with problems. These problems can cause them to be disengaged emotionally and decrease behavioral or cognitive engagement.

The students who are at-risk for dropping out have no caring adult who can provide the support and care necessary to become successful. Thus, in a school setting, the teachers should serve as caring adults for students (McCluskey, et.al, 2004; as cited in O'Shea, 2014).

The effects of informal mentoring relationship can have on students can be described in terms of student engagement (O'Shea, 2014). Thus, this study is going to investigate teachers' informal mentoring on at-risk students' engagement in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. The result from the study would be useful to increase the engagement of at-risk students and reduce the drop-out rate in Hlaing Township.

Aim of the Research

Main Aim

- To investigate teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students at Grade (9).

Specific Aim

- To identify the level of teachers' informal mentoring as perceived by at-risk students at Grade (9) in Hlaing Township.
- To investigate the level of engagement of at-risk students at Grade (9).
- To compare engagement of Grade (9) at-risk students who are receiving teachers' informal mentoring with those who are not receiving.

Research Questions

- What is the level of teachers' informal mentoring as perceived by at-risk students at Grade (9)?
- What is the level of engagement of at-risk students at Grade (9)?
- What is the comparison of the engagement of Grade (9) at-risk students who are receiving teachers' informal mentoring with those who are not receiving?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, teachers' informal mentoring was investigated with five dimensions based on informal mentoring dimensions developed by O'Shea (2014). These five dimensions are (1) respect all students, (2) prove trustworthiness to students, (3) demonstrate care, (4) demonstrate interest, and (5) maintain high expectations. At-risk students' engagement was investigated with three dimensions which were developed by Bloom (1956). These are (1) emotional engagement, (2) behavioral engagement and (3) cognitive engagement.

Respect all students

Before an informal mentoring relationship can be built, teachers must first respect the students and believe that they have the ability to be successful. The teachers must have a positive attitude and never treats at-risk students differently based on personal interests. The teachers do not ignore the students because students' successes have been linked to their teacher's beliefs about their ability (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

Prove trustworthiness to students

The establishment of trust is an essential component in mentoring relationship between teachers and students. The authority of the teacher, having the ability to influence student's behavior, is earned through the establishment of trust. The teacher must be honest and consistent to students. The teachers stand up for the students. They cannot build trust with their students if they are constantly disciplining them for minor infractions. In order for a student to trust a teacher and allow for that teacher to have a say in what behaviors they will engage in, he or she must first believe that this teacher has his or her best interests in mind.

Demonstrate care

Behaviorally or academically at-risk students need more than just kind words from a teacher to succeed in school. Teachers must demonstrate their care for students through specific actions for it to be received (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, as cited in O'Shea, 2014). The goal of all teachers, which is the basis for demonstrating care, should be to have warm, positive interactions with students (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The teachers must be friendly with the students, notice and appreciate them, provide relaxed classroom atmosphere, allow students to know the teachers and create a safe environment.

Demonstrate interest

Before students will be interested in what a teacher is saying to them, they must know that the teacher is interested in them. Most of all, students desire a teacher who is interested in and will listen to whatever it is they have to say (Knesting, 2008). The teachers must have informal conversations and personal attention to the students.

Maintain high expectations

The teachers must have high expectations for students. In order to meet those expectations, the teacher must work hard and they are communicating care. The idea of holding students to high academic standards is related to the previous concept of believing that all students have the ability to achieve. However, in order for a mentor teacher to truly support a student who is struggling, they must hold them to a high academic standard, then provide support which will build student resilience (Lessard et al., 2009) and provide high-level learning activities.

Emotional engagement

The emotional engagement of students is important because it can effect to behaviors. The emotional engagement of a student refers to how the student feels about school, their teachers, and the work provided (Fredricks et al., 2004, as citted in Van, 2010). The actions of teachers directly influence this emotional engagement and have been shown to be related to feelings of school satisfaction in students (Baker, 1999). The existence of external or internal problems in students' lives results in them having less closeness to their teachers (Nurmi, 2012, as cited in O'Shea, 2014).

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement can be considered as the student's willingness to engage in the activities that the teacher presents. A positive relationship between teacher and student has been shown to have a significant effect on this behavioral engagement (Roorda, et.al., 2011). The concept of behavioral engagement is often described in terms of effort or motivation. For students to display behavioral engagement, they actively participate in the activities that the teacher provides, increase in compliant behavior, and in effort in academic tasks. Moreover, they decrease in classroom disruptions, office referrals and risky behaviors.

Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is the way that students think and is measured by their level of academic achievement. If the teachers have positive relationships with the students, the students will behaviorally engage and put effort in academic tasks. This lead to academic achievement of the students. When academic achievement does not follow student effort, the support from the teacher becomes even more important in supporting resilience and encouraging the student to keep trying until success is achieved (Lessard et al., 2009, as cited in Van, 2010).

Definition of the Key Terms

Informal mentoring

- a natural component of relationships that occurs throughout the society, in the workplace, as well as in social, professional and family activities (Inzer,2005).

At-risk students

- A student who demonstrates behaviors that hinder academic success: poor grade-point average, excessive absences, chronic discipline referrals in one school year (Schorr, 2000).

Student Engagement

- Participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Kuh et.al., 2007, as cited in O'Shea, 2014).

Operational Definitions

Informal mentoring

- Informal mentoring means the natural relationship between teachers and students that involve respect, care, trust, interest and maintain high expectation. The higher the mean values means the higher the teachers practice informal mentoring on at-risk students.

Student Engagement

- Student engagement means the emotionally, behaviorally and cognitively engaged in activities inside and outside of the classroom. The higher the mean values describes the higher the engagement of at-risk students.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the time constraint, this study is geographically restricted to Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. The participants in this study were (194) Grade (9) at-risk students from (4) Basic Education High Schools in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. This study was confined to teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students.

Review of Related Literature

Mentoring

Mentoring is a relationship. It is a relationship between the mentor and the mentees. Mentoring is defined as a one-to-one relationship in which an expert or a senior person voluntarily gives time to teach, support, and encourage another (Santamaria, 2003). According to Zachary (2002), mentoring passes on knowledge of subjects, facilitates personal development, encourages wise choices, and helps the protégé to make transitions.

Informal mentoring

Informal mentoring is the natural relationship coming together of a mentor and mentee (O'Shea, 2014). This is done through personal and professional respect and admiration of each other. It is usually a long-term relationship. According to McDonald et.al. (2007), informal mentoring as the relationship that occurs naturally among youth and the adults with whom they come in contact. Both parties are motivated to enter the relationship in order to meet developmental needs. Informal relationships occurred as a result of interpersonal comfort and through unstructured social interactions and are not time bound or governed with external or internal rules (Hansman, 2000).

Characteristics of informal mentoring relationship

An informal mentoring relationship between a teacher and student can be characterized by the teacher

1. Supporting student progress,
2. Knowing and caring for the student,
3. Promoting open communication,
4. Being a listener and advice giver,
5. Improving student academic performance (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

Engagement

Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense making as well as activity (Harper & Quaye, 2009, as cited in O'Shea, 2014). Student engagement has been defined as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Kuh *et al.*, 2007, as cited in Van, 2010). Coates (2007) describes engagement comprises the following characteristics: active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect the required data in this study. The sample was 194 at-risk students from 4 schools in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. For quantitative study, two sets of questionnaire were used in this study. One set of questionnaire was intended to investigate teachers' informal mentoring on Grade (9) at-risk students. This questionnaire was based on the literature review under the guidance of supervisor. Another set of questionnaire was based on Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) and refined under the guidance of supervisor. The reliability coefficients (the Cronbach's alpha) were 0.92 for teachers' informal mentoring and 0.89 for at-risk students' engagement. Descriptive statistics was use to analyze the

data with the Statistical Package Science (SPSS) version 22. For qualitative study, interview was used to collect the data.

Findings

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing the Level of Teachers' Informal Mentoring

No	Teachers' Informal Mentoring Variables	N	Mean (SD)	Level of Teachers' Informal Mentoring
1	Respect	194	3.762(1.31)	Often
2	Trust	194	3.41(1.34)	Sometimes
3	Care	194	3.41(1.34)	Sometimes
4	Interest	194	3.55(1.57)	Often
5	Maintaining high expectation	194	3.13(1.39)	Sometimes
Teachers' Informal Mentoring			3.59(0.785)	Often

Scoring Direction: 1.00-1.49=never, 1.50-2.49=Seldom 2.50-3.49=Sometimes,
3.50-4.49=Often, 4.50-5.00*=Always

The table shows mean and standard deviation of the level of teachers' informal mentoring in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region.

For teachers' informal mentoring in schools, the mean value was 3.59. The teachers in the schools often performed informal mentoring on their at-risk students. The mean values for respect, trust, care, interest and maintaining high expectation were 3.762, 3.41, 3.41, 3.55 and 3.13. Therefore, the teachers in Hlaing Township often performed respect and interest to the students and sometimes performed trust, care and maintaining high expectation to the students.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing Teachers' Informal Mentoring Grouped by Schools

No	Schools	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	School A	49	3.64	0.64
2	School B	59	3.16	0.92
3	School C	36	3.91	0.83
4	School D	50	3.61	0.69
Teachers' Informal Mentoring		194	3.59	0.79

The table shows mean and standard deviation of teachers' informal mentoring in each school.

For teachers' informal mentoring, the mean values for School A, School B, School C and School D were 3.64, 3.16, 3.91 and 3.6. The results showed that teachers' informal mentoring in School C was the highest among all the other schools

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing Teachers' Informal Mentoring by Specialization

Specialization	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Specialization 7	82	3.6	0.69
Specialization 1	92	3.52	0.86
Specialization 2	20	3.66	0.79

According to table, the mean values were 3.6, 3.52 and 3.66. It was found that the at-risk students perceived that their teachers' informal mentoring on Specialization 2 students was the highest among all the at-risk students.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing Teachers' Informal Mentoring by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	89	3.6	0.4
Female	105	3.58	0.75

According to table, the mean values of male and female were 3.49 and 3.24. It was found that teachers' informal mentoring on male students was higher than female students.

Findings on the Level of At-risk Students' Engagement

To investigate the level of at-risk students' engagement, mean values were used. The tables are shown as below.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing the Level of At-risk Students' Engagement

No	At-risk Students' Engagement	N	Mean (SD)	Level of Students' Engagement
1	Emotional Engagement	194	3.6(0.75)	High
2	Behavioral Engagement	194	3.1(0.7)	Moderate
3	Cognitive Engagement	194	3.3(0.83)	Moderate
At-risk Students' Engagement			3.3(0.76)	Moderate

Scoring Direction: 1.00-1.49=very low, 1.50-2.49=low, 2.50-3.49=moderate, 3.50-4.49=high, 4.50-5.00*=very high

The table shows mean values and standard deviations showing the level of students' engagement in Hlaing Township, Yangon Region.

For at-risk students in schools, the mean value was 3.3. The at-risk students in the schools moderately engaged in their learning. The mean values for emotional engagement, behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement were 3.6, 3.1 and 3.3. Therefore, the at-risk students in Hlaing Township highly engagement in emotional engagement and moderately engaged in behavioral and cognitive engagement.

Findings on the Variations Showing At-risk Students' Engagement Grouped by Schools, Specialization and Gender

To investigate at-risk students' engagement grouped by schools, specialization and gender, mean values were used to compare the variations.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing the Level of At-risk Students' Engagement Grouped by Schools

No	Schools	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	School A	49	3.5	0.74
2	School B	59	3	0.52
3	School C	36	3.83	0.61
4	School D	50	3.38	0.6
At-risk students' engagement		194	3.39	0.67

The table shows mean values and standard deviations showing the level of students' engagement in each school.

For at-risk students' engagement, the mean values for School A, School B, School C and School D were 3.5, 3, 3.83 and 3.38. The results in the table indicated that the at-risk students in School C and school A highly engaged in their learning. The at-risk students in rest of the schools moderately engaged in their learning.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing At-risk Students' Engagement by Specialization

Specialization	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Specialization 7	82	3.4	0.58
Specialization 1	92	3.3	0.71
Specialization 2	20	3.5	0.8

According to table 4.3, the mean values were 3.4, 3.3 and 3.5. It was found that the engagement of at-risk students in specialization 2 was higher than the at-risk students in specialization 1 and 7.

Mean Values and Standard Deviations Showing At-risk Students' Engagement Grouped by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	89	3.49	0.65
Female	105	3.24	0.67

According to table, the mean values of male and female were 3.49 and 3.24. It was found that teachers' informal mentoring on male students was higher than female students.

Findings on the significant differences of at-risk students who receive teachers' informal mentoring and those who do not receive

To investigate the significant differences of at-risk students who receive teachers' informal mentoring and those who do not receive, mean values were used. The table is shown as follows.

Results of Independent Sample t-test for At-risk Students who receive teachers' informal mentoring and those who do not receive (N=194)

Content	Students	N	Mean	SD
Teachers' Informal Mentoring	Receiving	100	3.5	0.65
	Not Receiving	94	2.8	0.42

According to the table, the mean value of at-risk students who are receiving teachers' informal mentoring (3.5) is higher than those who are not receiving (2.8). It could be reasonably interpreted that at-risk students who are receiving teachers' informal mentoring have higher engagement than those who are not receiving.

Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestions

The primary purpose of this study was to study teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students in Basic Education High Schools of Hlaing Township, Yangon Region. Questionnaires have also been developed for this research to find out teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students occurred. A total of 194 at-risk students from 4 schools participated in this study. Based on the findings of quantitative study, the conclusion can be drawn as follows.

In this study, the teachers in the schools often performed informal mentoring on their at-risk students. The teachers in Hlaing Township sometimes performed trust, care and maintaining high expectation on at-risk students but they often performed the dimensions of interest and respect. Being a good listener and advice giver to at-risk students build a trusted relationship between teachers and at-risk students. According to Baker (1999), the actions of teachers directly influence this emotional engagement in students, the teachers in Hlaing Township should highly perform in all dimensions of informal mentoring.

The at-risk students in Hlaing Township moderately engaged in their learning. Among the dimensions of at-risk students' engagement, emotional engagement of at-risk students is higher than behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement. Therefore, the at-risk students in Hlaing Township feel positive feelings about school and teachers. The teachers should help the at-risk students to improve their behavioral and cognitive engagement. According to O'Shae (2014), a mentoring relationship with a teacher can result in the student experiencing positive feelings about school and the teacher, which in turn can lead to more effort and an increase in achievement. The teachers in Hlaing Township should encourage more informal mentoring to improve at-risk students' engagement.

According to the results, the at-risk students who receive informal mentoring have higher engagement in their learning. There was significant difference between at-risk students who are receiving teachers' informal mentoring and those who are not receiving. Therefore, we can conclude that high informal mentoring leads to high students' engagement. It can enhance the positive feeling about the school, teachers and schools, enhance resilience and engagement and produce higher academic performance. To reduce drop-out rate from schools, the teachers in Hlaing Township should encourage informal mentoring on at-risk students.

Today, our country has faced students' drop-out problem which is one of the issues in education. According to O' Shea (2014), informal mentoring was one of the solutions for reducing students' drop-out rate. In my study, at-risk students in Hlaing Township perceived that their teachers often performed informal mentoring on at-risk students. Therefore, the at-risk students

moderately engaged in their learning. The qualitative findings were complementary the quantitative findings.

In helping the at-risk students to actively engage in their learning, the teachers should provide academic and social support to students who are in need of significant help. In doing so, teachers and at-risk students interact with each other easily, actively engage in their learning, produce better learning outcomes, and gradually reduce the drop-out rate.

On the basis of the study, the following suggestions are made to enhance teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students.

- Teachers should know and care for at-risk students.
- They should promote open communication, be a listener and advice giver, support students' progress.
- Teachers should engage in psychosocial activities such as counseling, facilitating social interactions, role modeling and providing friendship.
- As the expectation of the teachers is critical for students, the teachers should maintain high expectation for all students.
- The teachers should foster positive relationship with the students by conveying respect and compassion for students, responding to their needs and feelings, listening carefully to them, and recognizing students' strength and contributions.
- Teachers should encourage the students to discuss in their teaching-learning process.
- Teachers should promote open and free communication out of class time.
- Teachers should give more interest to the students.
- Although emotional engagement of at-risk students in Hlaing Township is high, cognitive and behavioral engagement is moderate. Therefore, teachers should try to promote cognitive and behavioral engagement by improving informal mentoring.
- Professional development programs concerning teacher-student relationship should be arranged according to school level, township level and national level for improving teacher-student relationship.
- Policy makers should emphasize teacher training programs in order to strengthen teachers' mentoring on students.
- Teacher educators should collaboratively put effort to develop the teacher manuals which enhance teachers' mentoring on students.

Needs for Further Research

This study intended to study teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students. In this study, 194 Grade 9 at-risk students from 4 Basic Education High Schools of Hlaing Township, Yangon Region were sampled. It is necessary to investigate teachers' informal mentoring on engagement of at-risk students from schools in other townships, states and regions to represent the whole country. This study was based on five areas of informal mentoring: respect, trust, care, interest and maintain high expectation, three areas of students' engagement: emotional engagement, behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement. Therefore, for the improvement of education system, further studies needed to explore teachers' informal mentoring in different areas of engagement.

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