



Mentoring in the social context: Mentors' experiences with mentees' peers in a site-based program



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ABSTRACT

The primary mechanism by which mentoring promotes positive outcomes is typically considered to be the one-to-one relationship between mentor and youth. However, many mentoring relationships, particularly those in site-based programs, unfold within and are influenced by the larger contexts in which mentoring takes place. In the present study, we examined 161 first-person accounts written by college students serving as Lunch Buddy mentors in an elementary school-based mentoring program. This examination aims to glean insights into mentors' experiences of and responses to their mentees' peers as they carried out the mentoring relationship in a school cafeteria setting, and the ways that mentors' engagement of mentees' peer networks might have influenced the mentoring process. Our analyses delineate the different approaches taken by mentors to engage mentees' peers, and the challenge of focusing on the mentoring relationship while also managing interactions involving mentees' peers. Findings shed light on how the contexts in which mentoring relationships occur shape the course and function of mentoring, and expand our understanding of the processes through which mentoring relationships can promote positive change for mentees.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring interventions are typically conceptualized as a dyadic relationship between a mentor and youth (e.g., Rhodes, 2002). However, in site-based programs, the mentoring relationship unfolds within the larger social ecology of that particular setting. In many school-based programs, for example, mentoring takes place during the regular school day and in view of or even in the midst of mentees' peer network. The impact of these larger social ecologies on mentoring, and the strategies mentors use to navigate relationships within these settings, have received almost no empirical attention to date. In the present study, we examined first-person accounts written by college students serving as lunchtime mentors in an elementary school-based mentoring program. We sought insights into mentors' experiences of and responses to their mentees' peers as they carried out a mentoring relationship in this setting. We also hoped to learn how mentors' strategies for engaging with mentees' peer networks might influence the mentoring process.

1.1. Youth mentoring and the social context

The degree to which social contextual factors influence mentoring process and outcomes is underappreciated and understudied, in part perhaps given the traditional focus on the mentor–mentee bond as the critical mechanism of change in mentoring (e.g., Rhodes, 2002). Yet mentoring relationships do not exist in isolation; mentor–mentee interactions are embedded within the social network of the mentor, the mentee, or both (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013). Scholars have begun to consider how broader social networks (e.g., families) and other meaningful relationships (e.g., parents, teachers) shape and are shaped by youth mentoring relationships (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2013; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011).

There is a small body of evidence suggesting that youth outcomes are influenced by interactions between mentors and parents, by the quality of mentees' social relationships, and by the quality of relationships between mentor program staff and school personnel (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011; Spencer et al., 2011). Empirical data also suggests that having a mentor can lead to improvements in children's relationships and interactions with peers and parents (Craig et al., in press; Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Elledge, Cavell, Ogle, & Newgent, 2010; Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002), as well as that academic benefits accrued to youth

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via mentoring are partially explained by changes in children's sense of connectedness to parents (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005). More recently, Chan and colleagues found that higher quality mentor relationships were associated with improved parent– and teacher–child relationships (Chan et al., 2013). Specifically, parent– and teacher–child relationship quality mediated the effect of mentor relationship quality on academic attitudes and self-esteem (Chan et al., 2013), and teacher–child relationship quality mediated the effect of mentor relationship quality on prosocial behavior. This growing body of evidence speaks to the merit of continuing to examine the social ecology that surrounds youth mentoring relationships.

Important gaps in our understanding remain, including a lack of information about the ways mentors approach or manage youths' peer relationships and whether those processes help or hinder the goals of mentoring. School-based mentoring programs can provide a rich context for understanding how mentoring relationships influence and are influenced by mentored children's peer relationships and interactions. This is particularly true for school-based programs embedded in settings that allow mentors and mentees to interact routinely with friends and classmates of the mentored child.

1.2. Lunch Buddy mentoring

Lunch Buddy mentoring is a form of school-based mentoring that takes place in the school cafeteria, an important social context for children. The lunchroom, like the playground and other less structured school settings, is often a high-risk, high-reward social context in which children's peer interactions carry developmental significance (Boulton, 1999; Boulton, Chau, Whitehand, Amataya, & Murray, 2009; Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003; Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010). Presumably, most children use these settings to advance their social skills, further their friendships, and enhance their peer acceptance; for other children, these contexts can be perilous and represent recurring opportunities to be rejected or isolated by peers (Boulton, 1999; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1988; Martín, 2011).

Lunch Buddy mentoring was developed initially as a control condition in a randomized trial testing the efficacy of a three-semester, multicomponent intervention for aggressive elementary school children (Cavell, Elledge, Malcolm, Faith, & Hughes, 2009; Hughes, Cavell, & Meehan, 2001; Hughes, Cavell, Meehan, Zhang, & Collie, 2005). Because participating children were experiencing serious behavioral difficulties, school administrators were reluctant to allow a no-treatment control condition. Therefore, Lunch Buddy mentoring was created as a comparison condition acceptable to schools and families but intended to be relatively inert.

Based on theory and research suggesting the quality of the mentor–mentee match was the critical mechanism of change in youth mentoring (Rhodes, 2002), Lunch Buddy mentoring was structured in ways designed to dilute this potential mechanism. Lunch Buddy mentors received minimal training; all visits occurred during the school lunch period, and mentors joined the mentee and lunchtime peers at their assigned lunch table. In addition, children were paired with a different Lunch Buddy mentor across the three semesters. Not surprisingly, children rated Lunch Buddy mentors as acceptable but not highly supportive (Cavell et al., 2009). This finding is reminiscent of research on group-based mentoring in which mentors are paired with up to four children (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002). Herrera and colleagues found that mentor–mentee relationships varied widely within group mentoring, but were generally less close than that typically seen in one-on-one mentoring.

Contrary to expectations, however, Hughes et al. (2005) found that children in both the experimental and Lunch Buddy conditions showed significant improvement post-treatment on parent and teacher ratings of externalizing problems (Achenbach, 2001a,b) and on teacher ratings of behavioral and scholastic competence (Harter, 1985). Significant treatment effects emerged at the one- and the two-year follow-up for

teacher-rated externalizing problems and teacher-rated behavioral and scholastic competence, as well as for child-rated school belonging assessed at the one-year follow-up (Malcolm & Cavell, 2006). In all instances, significant differences favored the less intensive Lunch Buddy mentoring program. Subsequent analyses involving children enrolled in the same school throughout the intervention ($n = 86$) revealed that school context significantly moderated treatment outcome: Lunch Buddy mentoring was particularly effective for aggressive children in schools marked by high levels of playground aggression, economic disadvantage, and family mobility (Hughes et al., 2005). Lunch Buddy mentoring was also a socially acceptable intervention: children and mentors gave positive ratings of the program, and school administrators asked if Lunch Buddy mentoring could continue when the trial ended, a request *not* made for the more involved, experimental intervention. More recent work examining Lunch Buddy mentoring suggests it also holds promise as a form of selective prevention for children bullied at school (Elledge et al., 2010).

These findings invite consideration of alternative program models (such as group mentoring) that extend beyond the mentor–youth dyad, despite concerns that these are “in danger of trivializing what research indicates is at the very heart of their intervention: a caring adult–youth relationship” (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008, p. 275). In fact, Herrera et al. (2002) found evidence that group mentoring, despite moderate feelings of closeness between mentors and mentees, yielded gains for mentored youth in terms of enhanced social skills and improved relationships with teachers, parents, and friends. Also of note is that most youth in the Herrera et al. study “did not prefer an exclusively one-on-one relationship with their mentor” (p. iv). Indeed, some scholars view mentoring in the peer group context as an advantage, offering a unique and proximal vantage point for witnessing and perhaps enhancing key social processes that affect youth development (Henneberger, Deutsch, Lawrence, & Sovik-Johnston, 2013; Hirsch et al., 2000).

Perhaps the embedded nature of Lunch Buddy mentoring created opportunities for mentors to address peer-mediated contingencies and other social processes that serve to maintain or exacerbate children's externalizing behavior. Hughes et al. (2005) noted that weekly logs completed by Lunch Buddy mentors hinted at these possible mechanisms. For example, many Lunch Buddy mentors complained that nearby lunch mates frequently interacted with mentors and mentees, often seeking their attention and approval. Thus, it is possible that consistent visits from a valued mentor led peers to adopt more benign views of target children, many of whom had a negative peer reputation. It is also possible that the presence of the mentor disrupted negative peer processes that reinforce aggressive behavior. For example, having a mentor at the lunch table might have served to interrupt coercive patterns among lunch mates (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000), either directly through redirection or verbal reprimand, or indirectly through withdrawal of attention of interaction and deviant peer discourse. The positive presence of a valued mentor may have enhanced the relative reinforcement value of prosocial peer interactions compared to more deviant behaviors (Herrnstein, 1970; McDowell, 1988). Needed are studies that examine how the peer context can influence the development of mentoring relationships, as well as the processes through which these interconnected relationships might promote positive change for mentees.

1.3. The current study

Preliminary evidence indicates that Lunch Buddy mentoring is associated with important gains in target children's peer relationships (Craig et al., in press; Elledge et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2005). The goal of the present study, therefore, is to gain greater understanding of how the peer ecology affects the way Lunch Buddy mentors experience and navigate their interactions with mentored children and lunchtime peers. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of first-person

essays written by mentors following their mentoring experience. These narratives included mentors' reflections on their role as mentors, the nature of the mentoring relationship, and their perceptions of how lunchtime peers influenced the mentoring process.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Researchers analyzed 161 essays (3–5 page reflection papers) written by undergraduate psychology majors at the conclusion of their semester-long experience as a Lunch Buddy mentor. These essays were written by mentors as term papers for their coursework, and written instructions for the essays provided only very general guidelines, such as “describe your mentoring experience” and “define questions that are most relevant to your interests and mentoring experiences.” Students were also asked to consider the literature in their essay. No specific probes were provided to the students regarding focus on lunchtime peers; this focus of the mentors emerged as a theme across the data.

Mentors were recruited via on-campus fliers and word-of-mouth. Although mentors identified as either psychology or education majors, the present study focuses only on essays written by psychology majors who served as Lunch Buddy mentors. Self-reported demographic information was limited to 56 of these mentors who participated in the first of three semesters of mentoring for each of two cohorts, although the pattern of demographic characteristics of mentors varied little across semesters. For this subset of mentors, mean age was 20.9 years ($SD = 1.53$). Most were women (72.7%) who were single (i.e., never married; 98%), White, non-Hispanic (92.7%; 3.6% Hispanic; 1.8% African American; 1.8% Asian), whose parents were well educated (83.6% of mothers and 90.8% of fathers had at least some college).

Lunch Buddy mentors were paired with children participating in a prevention trial that targeted highly aggressive children at risk for later delinquency and substance use. Teachers from 13 public elementary schools nominated 356 students who matched a behavioral description of an aggressive child. Parental consent to screen was obtained for 281 (79%) of the children and 212 (75%) met the following criteria: (a) a score at or above 70T on the Aggressive Behavior subscale of the Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (TRF; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1991); (b) a score at or above 2 standard deviations above the classroom mean on peer-nominated overt or relational aggression; or (c) a score at or above 60 T on the Aggressive Behavior subscale of the TRF and a score above the classroom mean on peer-nominated relational or overt aggression. Parental consent to participate in the intervention study was obtained for 174 (82%) eligible children. Eighty-five of the 212 children were randomly assigned to the Lunch Buddy mentoring condition and received three semesters of mentoring. Parents were informed that mentored children were selected to participate in a study designed to improve the social behaviors and self-esteem of elementary school children and to prevent drug and alcohol use for these children when they are teenagers.

In this study, we analyzed essays describing the mentoring of 79 elementary school-aged children (59.7% male) randomly assigned to Lunch Buddy mentoring. Children were on average 8.14 ($SD = .69$) years old at the onset of the study. The ethnic composition of the sample was 36.4% Caucasian, 37.7% African American, 24.7% Hispanic, and 1.3% Asian American. Marital status of participant children's primary caregiver was 32.5% married, 5.2% separated, 18.2% divorced, 23.4% never married, and 1.3% widowed. Average education for participant children's mothers was 11.84 years ($SD = 2.41$) and 12.22 years ($SD = 2.78$) for fathers. The majority of the sample (85.7%) was not receiving specialized services in school or at home at the onset of the study, while 13.0% was enrolled in content mastery/resource room services and 1.3% was receiving speech services.

2.2. Lunch Buddy mentoring

Lunch Buddy mentoring was a stand-alone mentoring intervention that spanned three academic semesters. Mentors visited twice each week (30 min per visit) and joined the target child and classmates at their regular lunchroom table. Female mentors were paired with girls or boys, but male mentors were paired only with boys. Children were paired with a different Lunch Buddy mentor each semester, and all college student mentors were full time university students enrolled in a field experiences course in the Department of Psychology. Prior to mentoring, Lunch Buddy mentors participated in a brief (2-hour) orientation and received handouts that covered a) preliminary paperwork, b) issues of safety and proper dress and behavior in an elementary school, c) instructions for completing weekly log sheets, d) procedures for handling critical events (e.g., highly disruptive behavior, disclosure of maltreatment), and d) guidelines for how and when to begin the process of ending the mentoring relationship. Mentors were required to turn in log sheets documenting twice-weekly visits and identifying any difficulties that arose.

2.3. Measures and design

A total of 161 essays, which were submitted as term papers at the conclusion of the semester, were written by college students who participated in mentoring in the school setting. These essays were originally used for the purposes of course credit, and it was only subsequent to the receipt of these papers that the co-authors of this paper considered analyzing the narrative as an important source of qualitative data. Therefore, while the essays were not originally considered “data”, an amendment to the larger IRB was submitted and accepted to allow these narratives to be analyzed in de-identified form.

The use of documents as narrative data, although limited in the youth mentoring literature to date, has been more prominent in qualitative research in psychology and education, and, more recently, in social work (Reissman & Quinney, 2005). Through close examination of the written word and of personal reflection and story, narrative analysis privileges the voices, values and ethics of the writer (Wilks, 2005), in this case of the mentors.

All coders on the three-person analytic team (including two co-authors of this paper) were trained to code as well as to use “NVIVO” as a qualitative software tool. Training focused on coding included extensive reading on qualitative analysis, as well as group coding of multiple sections of data in order to practice assigning codes that accurately reflect and label the data. After training, which took place over two months, the team employed narrative analysis to code each essay using a multi-phase, inductive approach (Padgett, 2008). First, each member reviewed a third of the papers (with all three coders overlapping on approximately 10% of the papers) and developed a preliminary list of codes that were discussed and combined. Each team member then used these codes to review all essays, noting places where codes did not depict the data clearly. Following this initial review, the team met to identify necessary revisions to the codebook. This process was repeated as needed to ensure that revised codes accurately reflected the data. The team developed a final coding book that clearly defined each code and provided examples of each from the data. All essays were then uploaded into NVIVO, and were double coded by two of the three members of the analytic team. Throughout this process, the team met biweekly to discuss questions or concerns that arose in applying the codebook to the data. By double coding every transcript and working closely as a research team, dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) across coding was enhanced.

Once coding was completed, the research team discussed emergent themes identified through the process. Based on the strength of the themes generated through this analysis, particular attention was devoted to codes focused on the role of mentee peers in the mentoring experience, including a) peers' influence on mentor's relationship with

the mentee, b) mentors' experiences relating to mentees' peers, and c) mentor's roles within the larger social system. Additional analysis was conducted by the research team to focus on these codes, and themes derived from this analysis will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

3. Results

Analysis of mentors' narratives indicated that mentors approached their own involvement with mentees' peers in a variety of ways. Some mentors made engaging with peers a central and intentional part of the mentoring process. Others reported keeping primary focus on the mentee, viewing the task of engaging with peers as incidental to the goal of fostering a relationship with the mentee (e.g., when it could not be avoided, as a way to bolster the strength of the mentoring relationship). Findings indicated that in some cases, peers were seen as a facilitating force in the mentoring process; in others, peers were cast more often as a hindrance, distraction or obstacle to relationship development. Likewise, in some cases, mentors' narratives indicated efforts to facilitate mentees' relationships with peers, whereas in other cases mentors' described efforts that served to hinder or otherwise potentially negatively impact mentees' peer relationships. Each of these findings is detailed in the sections below (see Fig. 1 for an overview and visual display of interrelationships among themes).

3.1. Mentor involvement with peers

Mentors' reflections on their approach to the mentoring process indicated that mentors typically enacted one of two broad approaches to engaging with mentees' lunchtime peers. In about half of the cases, mentors' approach could be characterized as incidentally involving the peers. Among these mentors, two further sub-groups could be identified – those who were simply following the program structure and guidelines and thus did not seek to engage mentees' peers, and those who did engage the peers but did so only when it seemed potentially helpful to the relationship with their mentee. In contrast, the other approximately half of the mentors discussed actively and intentionally engaging with both their mentee and with mentees' peers while at the lunch table.

3.1.1. Unintentional involvement with peers

Among those mentors for whom peer engagement was unintentional, many were merely responding to the inevitable encounters with peers that occurred in the context of the school cafeteria. At least some interaction with peers was a natural part of the rhythm of the Lunch Buddy mentoring program, and the vast majority of mentors sat at the lunch table with the mentee and mentees' peers. Therefore, interactions among mentors, mentees, and peers were largely inevitable. As one mentor wrote, "All of his classmates were curious of my presence, and as I got to know them, it seemed I was a mentor for the whole class." In the midst of this context, balancing the needs of their mentee in the context of the school cafeteria proved challenging at times. A mentor described becoming "friends with most of the other children as well," but also noted, "Every day when I came in, it was a battle between them as to where I was going to sit, and who was going to hold my attention for the longest."

Other mentors within this group, while more explicit in their approach to incorporating peers, only did so in the service of furthering their one-to-one relationship with the mentee, which they considered to be their priority. As one mentor wrote, "The opportunity to have a part in the lives of so many children I openly welcomed and accepted, yet being careful to always make sure [my protégé] remained my number one priority." These mentors had clearly prioritized the role of being a mentor to one individual child, and interaction with peers, while conscious at times, was not intended as a primary mechanism through which the mentor connected with his/her mentee.

3.1.2. Intentional involvement with peers

In contrast to mentors who engaged with peers incidentally, approximately half of Lunch Buddy mentors appeared to interact with and attend to mentees' peers as much as they did their mentee, and did so in service of their role as a mentor. These mentors described fostering more intentional and intensive relationships with lunchtime peers, and comments regarding this process emerged to contribute to a strong theme within the data. For example, one mentor wrote: "Throughout the semester, I learned each child's name and built a bond with all of them." This same mentor described an intention to make a positive impact on all of the children: "I began to interact with the children around [my protégé] more and more so that they, too, would know that they were just as special as [my protégé]." Another mentor wrote:

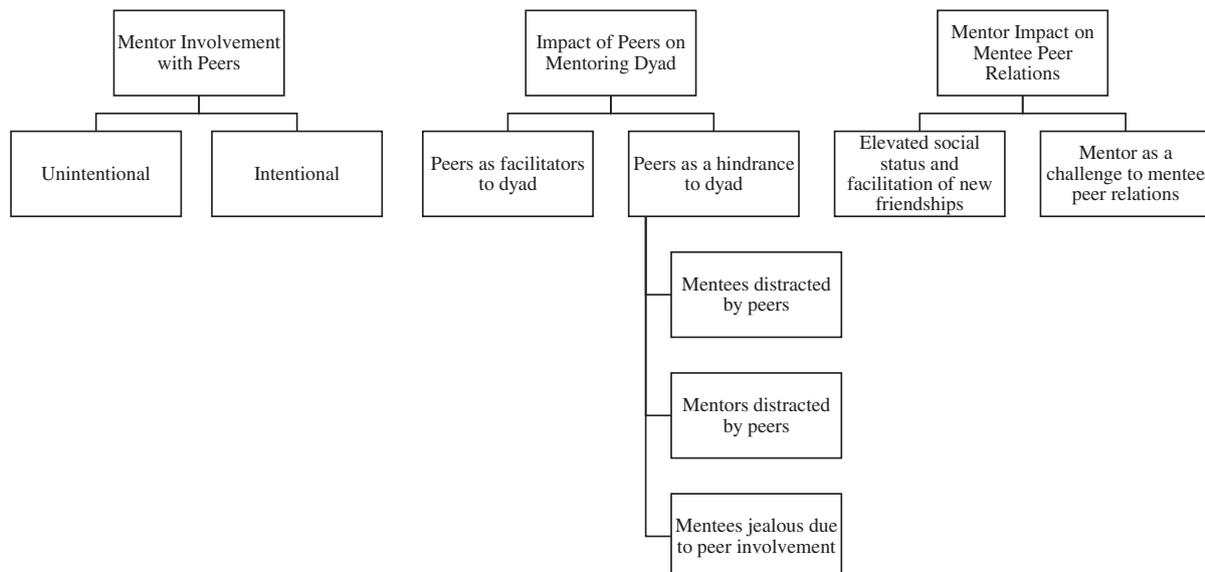


Fig. 1. Major themes and their interrelations.

I wasn't just [my protégé's] Buddy, I was a buddy to all of them, as well. I looked forward to visiting with all of them, and they looked forward to visiting with [my protégé's] Buddy. I was able to share with more than just my Lunch Buddy, and more than one little girl was able to touch my life.

In some cases, mentors indicated that their visits generated curiosity on the part of mentees' peers, and that they engaged these peers in part to draw them into positive interactions with the mentees. As an example of this, many mentors reported that mentees chose particular peers to sit near the dyad at the lunch table. In fact, one mentor noted that her mentee had established a rotation system: "She alternated which friends would sit with us; they had their own rotation worked out." Another mentor wrote, "Often [my protégé] and I sat outside and had nice sunny lunches along with special friends who were chosen by [my protégé] to come along."

These quotes exemplify the approach taken by mentors who saw their role as expanding beyond a one-to-one mentoring relationship; they actively included mentees' peers in their delivery of school-based mentoring and in their building of relationship with their mentee.

3.2. Impact of peers on mentoring dyad

In addition to differences in mentors' method of engaging with mentees' peers, the mere presence of peers in the mentoring setting appeared to influence mentors' approach to developing the mentoring relationship. For the majority of mentors, the presence of peers seemed to facilitate growth in the dyadic relationship. For example, some mentors noted that they would not have gotten as close to their mentees as they did without the help of talkative neighboring peers. For other mentors, sitting with lunchtime peers posed challenges to relationship formation, mainly by detracting from mentors' efforts to have on-to-one interactions with their mentee, and at times leading to jealousy or confusion for the mentee.

3.2.1. Peers as facilitators to dyad

The presence of peers at the lunch table often acted as a benefit for the mentor–mentee relationship. In essays noting this benefit, mentors wrote about mentees' initial discomfort or lack of conversation when the pair first met. This was particularly common in schools that encouraged mentors and mentees to hold their initial visit at a separate guest table. Conversely, when the pair sat at the same table with peers of the mentee, these essays described mentees feeling more at ease and more talkative with the mentor. Mentors also noted various strategies mentees and peers used to facilitate conversations between mentor and mentee, whether intentional or not. For example, some mentors described occasions when their mentee would choose certain peers to sit near the dyad and how that benefited the relationship. Mentors also reported that some peers would engage both mentor and mentee in conversation through a basic question and answer format. By engaging both and drawing information out, the conversation flowed easier between the dyad and seemed to help mentor and mentee establish common ground. Mentors also reported that peers would occasionally show them a lot of attention and interest, which at times seemed to enhance mentee's own interest in and view of the mentor.

Although as noted previously, school staff would occasionally suggest that mentors sit alone with the mentee at a table reserved for guests, most mentors sat with their mentee and with their mentee's peers during the mentoring visits in order to facilitate the relationship. One mentor noted that sitting alone with the mentee became a concern:

At a couple of our visits, his teacher suggested that we sit by ourselves. We did this so that we could have one-on-one conversations

to learn more about each other. This did not work as we thought it would, as [my protégé] gave short-ended answers to my surface questions. However, his interaction with me expanded greatly when we added one or more of his friends.

Another mentor noted a difference between sitting alone with the mentee versus sitting among their peers by saying: "It seemed to really make a difference in his communication to sit with his friends." Ultimately, many mentors experienced the role of peers as facilitators to the relationship, illustrated through experiences with peers and through those separated from peers.

3.2.2. Peers as a hindrance to dyad

In contrast to mentors who discussed lunchtime peers as facilitators to the relationship, almost equally as strongly in the papers emerged a theme of concern regarding how peers hindered efforts to develop a relationship with their mentees. The way by which these challenges occurred varied, ranging from distracting the mentee in some way or commanding too much of mentors' attention during the time they were visiting their mentee. In some cases, mentors even indicated that they believed that their mentee became jealous of their peers when they perceived that peers were given too much time and attention from their mentor. It was common for mentors to note the challenge of balancing these competing needs.

3.2.2.1. Mentees distracted by peers. Interactions with lunchtime peers seemed to hinder growth in the mentoring relationship in cases where the mentee was so distracted by these interactions that it became difficult for the mentor to engage directly with the child. Some mentors noted that their mentee would engage in what was described as "bad behaviors" when with their peers. Others found their mentees to be more distant or preoccupied when interacting with nearby peers. One mentor described the mentee as "performing" for his peers, making it difficult for the mentor to connect with the child: "I could also tell that [my protégé] wasn't being himself. He was trying to impress everyone. He was putting on a show." This mentor described the boy as being very different when the two of them were alone, and that it was "easy to get him to open up when we were away from the class, rather than right in the middle of it." Mentors who experienced these kinds of hindrances would at times report deciding to move to the "visitor's table" in an effort to spend time alone with their mentee, at which point they would report being better able to connect with their mentee in a more substantive, relationship-promoting way.

3.2.2.2. Mentors distracted by peers. Some mentors noted being distracted by lunchtime peers, and described three different ways in which these distractions affected the mentoring relationship. Some mentors noted that the novelty of their presence seemed to contribute to a competition among the children (mentees and peers) for mentors' conversational time and attention. Other mentors noted a simple lack of time to address the many conversational bids generated by both mentees and their peers. Still other wrote about feeling overwhelmed by the sheer noise and level of activity generated by mentees, nearby peers, and others in the school cafeteria.

In the midst of this distraction, mentors noted at times rather intense competition among the children for their time and attention, which on occasion would result in a conflict or clash that burdened the mentoring relationship. One mentor described how the competition would start as soon as the mentor arrived:

The largest obstacles that I had to overcome in order to get closer to [my protégé] were the other children. They were all very talkative, outgoing kids. They would all fight for my attention from the moment I walked in the door. It took a while for me to ask [my protégé] a question, and actually get an answer from her, and not all of the other children.

In some cases, this was a recurring pattern that made it difficult for the mentor–mentee pair to develop a consistent one-to-one relationship.

A number of mentors described using what seemed like too much of their time with mentees to engage in conversations with peers because they did not want to “shut them out.” As one mentor noted, “I think that a lot of our communication problems had to do with his friends continuously asking me question after question. They all wanted to know how old I was, about college, and a billion other things. I really did not mind [my protégé’s] friends; I just felt that they took away from our time together.” These mentors understood peers’ desire to engage with the dyad but struggled to balance time spent on peers versus time devoted to the mentee. Ultimately, these mentors felt that time spent engaged with peers took away from time they could have spent with their mentee.

Distraction was also caused by high levels of volume and activity level in the cafeteria, which also challenged relationships. Mentors described how the children would talk at once and talk over each other, whether talking to the mentor or talking among themselves. As one mentor wrote, “Every visit with the children was extremely loud! They insisted upon talking over one another. It was very hard to focus on [my protégé] when the other boys were so attention starved.” Some mentors found this distracting and indicated that it made it difficult to have an extended conversation with their mentee or with others in the program.

3.2.2.3. Mentees jealous due to peer involvement. For some mentors, their mentees’ jealousy of the attention they gave to nearby peers in the cafeteria was particularly challenging. One mentor wrote about these experiences in the following way:

If someone came up to talk to me or just ask my name, [my protégé] would jump in and say, ‘She’s my Lunch Buddy! Go away and leave her alone!’ I would try to explain to her that they were just curious why I was there and that we should be nice and talk to them, but she would not accept this.

This mentor indicated that there had been repeated occurrences of the mentee purposefully trying to isolate the pair from her peers, which led the mentor to wonder whether the girl was jealous or insecure, or was simply proud of her mentor and desiring of exclusive time. Such uncertainty was common as mentors sought to interpret such cues in navigating the peer ecology of this program.

In their essays, mentors described their efforts to manage these kinds of situations. For example, one mentor worked to turn territorial-like behavior into a positive experience by promising undivided attention to their mentee:

Her friends would always try to talk to me, get me to read with them, and quiz them on their multiplication problems. [My protégé] would get upset and tell them to leave me alone. When they would interrupt [my protégé] and I, I always told them to wait until [my protégé] had finished talking to me. Finally, I told her that she had my undivided attention and that if she was talking to me, her friends would have to wait.

The mentor thought that was successful and noted, “Making this commitment put her mind at ease because she knew she would not have to compete for my attention.” This interpretation helps to illustrate the many challenges mentors face within the peer context as they seek to understand and respond to the needs of their mentees.

3.3. Mentor impact on mentee peer relations

In addition to shedding light on how peer interaction influenced the mentoring process, mentors’ narratives also revealed how the mentoring relationship might have influenced mentees’ relationships

with their peers. In most cases, the influence was positive, as mentors reported that their mentees’ social status had been elevated as a consequence of their participation in the mentoring program. Some mentors even noted instances where they leveraged this increase in social status to help broker new connections for their mentees.

3.3.1. Elevated social status and facilitation of new friendships

Some mentors described how their visits had served to increase the social standing of their mentees with peers. As one mentor wrote, “Whenever I came for my visits, [my protégé] became the most popular kid in school. Everyone wanted to eat with us.” In some cases, interest in the mentor created natural opportunities for the mentee to build connections with these interested peers. As one mentor wrote, “The children seemed interested in who I was. Their interest in me was able to bridge interacting with [my protégé] and the children at her table.” Another mentor described intentionally leveraging this interest to help the mentee deepen his connection with peers by encouraging him to choose one peer to join them during their lunch meetings. As this mentor wrote, “[My protégé] seemed to enjoy this privilege because he was the center of attention and all of the other kids wanted to be the one who was picked to sit at the special table.” Another mentor detailed a similar approach:

He told me that he did not have any friends and that nobody liked him. This upset me, and I wanted to do something to make him feel better... I told [my protégé] that if he could make one friend before our next lunch, that his friend could eat with us as well. He seemed confident that he would make a friend by then. The next meeting [my protégé] accomplished his goal, and brought a friend to eat lunch with us. I was so proud of him, as was he.

Whether by virtue of the curiosity and excitement created among peers by mentors’ presence, or due to more intentional efforts on the part of the mentor, some mentors were convinced that their mentees had experienced positive gains in their peer relationships.

3.3.2. Mentor as a challenge to mentee peer relations

In rare but important cases, mentors indicated that mentees’ participation in Lunch Buddy mentoring had challenged their relationships with peers, often because of awkwardness or uncertainty in how mentors should relate to mentees and their peers. For example, some peers were reported to have deemed having a mentor as “uncool”, or were described as disinterested in either the mentor or the mentee. As one mentor wrote, “He would sometimes have trouble finding someone to sit with us. The other kids would either want to sit with all their friends or they just didn’t care to sit with us. I think that disappointed [my protégé], but it was so hard to tell.” Similarly, another mentor, who had successfully established a positive relationship with a previous mentee while at another school, noted a lack of enthusiasm from the mentee’s peers. The mentor wrote that the “children seemed uninterested and no one really wanted to sit by us.” A third mentor explained the apparent social isolation experienced by the mentee as perhaps associated with having being the only child who had a mentor. The mentor wrote, “I think sometimes he just felt left out by the other boys. None of the other kids had lunch buddies.” Mentors’ lack of clarity about peers’ perceptions seemed to be associated with concerns about the potential limited benefits of mentoring. However, in some instances, the mentoring relationship may have been detrimental in this area. In a few cases, mentors reported a sense that mentoring had served to isolate their mentee, which resulted in the mentee separating from or losing some of their friends because of diminished social contact.

Because these were relatively isolated accounts in the essays analyzed, additional research is needed to examine the degree to which these narratives indicate a level of risk or concern for participating children.

4. Discussion

In this study, we analyzed essays written by college student mentors who conducted all visits in the school cafeteria, a less structured school setting where the quality of children's peer interactions can impact their social development (Boulton, 1999; Boulton et al., 2009; Leff et al., 2003; Low et al., 2010). Our findings shed light on challenges and opportunities that can arise when mentors are embedded in and actively engaged with a pivotal social context in the life of their mentees. As expected, Lunch Buddy mentors described attempts to interact with and form a relationship with their mentee; less expected was the priority placed on interactions with nearby lunch mates, and how those interactions affected the mentoring match, revealed by these accounts. Mentors used a variety of strategies to navigate these competing relationships and, importantly, all were chosen in the absence of direct programmatic instruction.

In many cases, mentors simply reacted to what they encountered in the school cafeteria; they tried to manage unsolicited interactions with nearby peers in ways that would facilitate and not detract from the relationship with their mentee. In other cases, mentors became more intentional in how they interacted with peers, often leveraging interactions with nearby lunch mates in service of facilitating the mentoring process in some way. Regardless of the direction taken, our analyses clearly illustrate that all mentors faced the question of how to address the active presence of mentees' peers. Varied paths taken by Lunch Buddy mentors in this study speak to both the potential and the peril of mentoring as it moves from an isolated, one-to-one activity between mentor and mentee to a vehicle by which mentors can actively engage with mentees' network of social relationships (Cavell & Henrie, 2010; Elledge et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2011). Kuperminc and Thomason (2013) theorized that mentoring in a peer group context allows for both direct interactions as well as opportunities to observe interactions among others, thereby enriching the experience for all participants. Moreover, the potential mechanisms of change could "operate via the (vertical) relationship between mentors and mentees (as in traditional one-on-one mentoring) as well as through (horizontal) processes of group cohesion and mutual help" (p. 276). Themes that emerged from our analyses captured the complexity of embedding mentoring in the school cafeteria and highlighted three distinct domains of interaction: mentor–mentee, mentor–peer, and peer–mentee.

Because Lunch Buddy mentoring was designed originally as a control condition, impediments to match strength were not unexpected and were found to limit the degree to which mentees viewed mentors as supportive (Cavell et al., 2009). This qualitative analysis begins to shed light on these challenges, including how distraction, jealousy, and interruptions impeded relationship process and development over time. However, unexpected gains for aggressive children paired with Lunch Buddy mentors hinted at the possibility that other, more beneficial processes unfolded at the lunch table. Reports by mentors suggested that peers energized mentor–mentee interactions, especially at the start of the match. Moreover, mentees received immediate and usually positive feedback from peers about the value of mentors' visits. For their part, peers were given opportunities over the course of mentoring to interact in more positive ways with classmates whose behavior problems were often associated with peer rejection or isolation (Hughes et al., 2005).

Variability in mentors' approaches toward nearby peers raise important questions about whether a more intentional engagement of peers can enhance program effects for site-based programs such as Lunch Buddy mentoring. Among mentors in this study, a common perception was that social interactions with both mentees and peers were beneficial to mentees, either in the form of direct effects on mentored youth (Keller, 2005) or as a contributing factor to a more positive peer climate (Karcher, 2005, 2008; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2013). Indeed, some Lunch Buddy mentors felt at times like they were attending to a group of children, one of whom was struggling with externalizing problems

and low peer acceptance (Cavell & Henrie, 2010). It is also interesting to note that generally positive outcomes were found for children paired with Lunch Buddy mentors even though some mentors questioned whether their presence amid the noise and chaos of the school lunchroom actually benefitted their mentee.

4.1. Implications

We found that Lunch Buddy mentors responded to the presence of peers with varying levels of intentionality, reflecting it seems individual differences in goals, interests, and capacities. But the current findings have implications for practitioners, especially those whose programs seek to embed mentoring within a larger peer context (e.g., group mentoring). At minimum, narratives analyzed in this study suggest that mentors would benefit from strategies designed to reduce instances in which peer-involved interactions could have negative or damaging effects on mentored youth. For example, training in attunement (Pryce, 2012) could help mentors better manage the multiple distractions, challenges, and opportunities presented by the peer context. Mentors might also benefit from explicit guidance on how to take advantage of the many relationship opportunities they will encounter (Cavell & Henrie, 2010; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2013). As reflected in the essays, consistent visits from a valued mentor appeared to offer something in addition to a supportive mentoring relationship – a chance for mentors to enhance the lunchtime peer interactions and social reputation of mentored children (Cavell & Henrie, 2010). Indeed, recent versions of Lunch Buddy mentoring have become very intentional, framing mentors' interactions with peers as a means of promoting more positive relationships between mentored children and their lunchtime peers (Elledge et al., 2010; Gregus, Craig, Hernandez Rodriguez, Pastrana, & Cavell, 2015).

The current findings also have implications for mentoring that takes place in other contexts within children's natural environment (e.g., home, school playground, neighborhood, community center, sports teams). Practitioners who encourage mentors to spend time in mentees' own life space could benefit from attending to contextual factors that could potentiate the mentoring process. Current findings bring attention to understudied and possibly under-leveraged contextual dimensions in youth mentoring (Cavell & Elledge, 2013). Whether mentoring is community- or site-based, mentors often have opportunities to engage and interact with important people in the life of their mentee, including teachers, parents, coaches, and peers (Keller, 2005). The frequency and manner with which mentors take advantage of those opportunities has not been studied, but we suspect few mentors are adequately trained to navigate these often-complex settings and the possibilities they afford (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013).

Also understudied is the value-added potential of embedding mentors in youths' natural networks. Nevertheless, this notion is in line with recent research examining mentors' engagement with mentees' parents (Spencer et al., 2011) and youths' active search for mentors in their own community (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013). Embedding mentors in contexts beyond the school cafeteria could yield positive changes in children's natural social ecology and expand the overall potential for youth mentoring as a prevention strategy (Cavell & Elledge, 2013). To capitalize on this potential, however, mentors will need to be coached and supported in managing the risks that come with these more complex social dynamics (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013).

4.2. Limitations and conclusion

Our findings contribute to greater understanding of youth mentoring implemented in the context of youths' social ecology; however, important limitations to this study also must be mentioned. Mentor essays analyzed for this study provided a useful window into mentors'

subjective experiences, but were written as end-of-term papers. Thus, mentors were not asked to address issues specific to the challenges and opportunities of mentoring a child within a key social context. This is important in that mentors likely chose to write about those issues only when particularly salient. Mentors were also working with a particular group of children (i.e., children identified by teachers and peers as highly aggressive) using a more circumscribed model of mentoring than is typically employed in traditional mentoring programs.

Finally, despite the promise this study suggests for the presence of mentors in mentees' social ecology, care must be taken when decisions are made about placing mentors in a particular social context. Pairing college student mentors with aggressive elementary school children and placing them in the school lunchroom was serendipitously beneficial, but peer-linked mechanisms that were presumably operating (Craig et al., in press) might not generalize to middle school cafeterias where mentor visits could lead to negative peer reactions and a drop in mentees' social status. Where, when, and how mentors manage system-embedded visits will likely require careful consideration of multiple parameters, including the demographic characteristics of mentors, of mentees, and of others in the social network. Once again, research from group mentoring is instructive here (Herrera et al., 2002; Kuperminc & Thomason, 2013): Researchers have noted that mentoring in a group context carries the risk that mentored youth will not receive adequate individual attention from their mentor, as well as the risk that mentored youth will engage in peer-mediated deviancy training known to increase growth in later antisocial behavior (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Compared to traditional one-on-one mentoring relationships, the boundaries of appropriate mentoring are likely to be more subtle and harder to recognize when navigating the multifaceted and dynamic role of a system-embedded mentor. Mentors will likely need additional training if they are to avoid potential pitfalls associated with entering the increasingly layered contexts in which young people grow and develop.

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