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The effect of peer mentoring on mentors themselves: A case study of college students

**Abstract**

Keywords:

# Introduction

In the transition to higher education, students face many challenges while juggling multiple demands (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2004). They encounter a myriad of obstacles, such as adapting to a new school environment (e.g., newteaching styles and class schedules), financial issues, social challenges, and homesickness. These challenges are often exacerbated for students with special needs (Madaus, 2005). The term “special needs” refers to any student who is formally diagnosed with a physical, emotional, and/or learning disability (Bryant, Bryant, & Smith 2017).

The number of students with disabilities attending higher education has soared in the last decade (Yssel, Pak, & Beilke, 2016). Institutions of higher education have implemented various measures to try and make the learning environment more accessible and, thus, create a smoother transition for these students (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014). The current standard includes providing services through support centres at the institutions (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014). These services include providing scholarships, assistive technologies, an accessible campus environment, emotional support, and a variety of workshops (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014). Despite these measures, students with special needs continue to face a higher risk of failing or not completing their studies as compared to typically developing students (Walker, 2016).

Academic institutions generally run support centres for students with social, emotional, physical and learning disabilities. Traditional intervention programs are based on providing assistance in the form of assistive technologies, private tutoring, meetings with counsellors, and workshops. Although the support provided has been shown to benefit these students academically, including enabling them to better cope with the demands of academic studies, many students have reported feeling that their reliance on the support centres highlights their dependency on others and their disabilities. Moreover, many students expressed feeling a lack of confidence and anxiety that extended beyond the academic sphere, and impacted their personal and social lives as well. Given these drawbacks, we searched for a new approach to assist students with special needs that would enhance their self-confidence and encourage their sense of independence.

We examined one particular support centre which initiated a peer mentoring intervention program for students with special needs. Unlike typical mentoring programs, in this program the mentors themselves are students with special needs who provide assistance and mentoring to other students with special needs.

Indeed, research on the effects of mentoring has, thus far, overwhelmingly concentrated on mentees. However, a small number of studies have examined the effects of peer-mentoring on the well-being of the mentors themselves (Einat, 2017), but none have explored the question among mentors who are students with special needs (e.g., physical, mental, emotional needs). This paper seeks to fill this void by providing an analysis of mentors’ narratives regarding the effect of mentoring on their academic success, as well as their emotional and psychological well-being. Specifically, the study explores the significance of mentoring to the self-rehabilitation of the mentors by exploring their mentoring experience and its effect on their dealing with challenges and hardships in their daily lives. We suggest that providing students with special needs with the experience of mentoring can be incorporated into existing programs to improve these students’ adjustment to higher education institutions.

***Theoretical Background***

Even as the number of students with special needs who are admitted to institutions of higher education rises, the retention rates of these students are relatively lower than those of students without disabilities (Walker, 2016). This pattern is not surprising since students with special needs have to cope not only with the challenges of academia, but also with the challenges of their disabilities. One way to achieve better retention rates among these students is to improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy by using peer mentoring. Peer mentoring is an intervention that is based on the premise that non-professionals are better suited to provide emotional and/or instrumental support to others who share a similar predicament (Roberts & Rappaport, 1989). Most research on mentoring focuses on student mentees (Clare & Aisling, 2017; Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). However, a few studies have attempted to examine the effects of mentoring on the mentors themselves, particularly in cases in which the mentors share a similar difficulty as their mentees.

The effects of peer-mentoring on mentors has been researched among prisoners who mentored other peer-prisoners (Einat, 2017). Mentor-prisoners who participated in the program reported an increased ability to find new meaning in life, greater willingness to participate in the rehabilitation process, and a better ability to connect and form relationships with the prison’s staff. The mentors felt a higher level of responsibility and empathy towards their fellow prisoners and felt that they were able to provide them with emotional support (Einat, 2017).

One theory related to the idea of peer mentoring is Riessman’s (1965) helper theory. According to this theory, when a person provides help to another person who is in a similar predicament, the helper benefits, perhaps even more than the recipient. Helpers may improve not only by experiencing an increase in their motivation and confidence, but also in their self-efficacy; in other words, peer mentors are provided a context in which their help is required and they are important to others. The opportunity to positively influence another person’s life is a rewarding experience, and research has shown that it is accompanied by an increasing ability to connect with others and a feeling of satisfaction in having helped another person (Skovholt, 1974). The principles of helper theory may be most beneficial to people from a low socio-economic status, who are usually considered an at-risk population (Riessman, 1965; Shmidt, Shummow, & Kacker, 2012). In fact, for young adults, being a helper may be a rehabilitative experience that positively affects their self-image (Riessman, 1965). This model has been applied and found to be conducive in diverse circumstances, such as in various addiction programs (Riessman, 1965; Salzer & Shear, 2002; Skovholt, 1974) and among non-special needs students who mentor other students (Gartner & Riessman, 1993). The current study, however, is the first to examine the experience of being a peer mentor among students with special needs at an institution of higher education.

People with special needs rarely view themselves as service providers (Brill, 1994) since they are usually on the receiving end of assistance. Programs in which students with special needs have a contributing, active role are likely to benefit those students by making them feel more valuable, enhancing their communication skills, and increasing their self-esteem (Brill, 1994). Participating in such a program may also lead them to live healthier lives, both mentally and physically, since they would need to maintain their health in order to help others. In fact, their involvement in the learning and social aspect of the academic life might impact their retention and graduation rates (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

Another model that is relevant to the current study is the model of positive psychology, which is based on the premise that in order to achieve happiness, one should focuson creating positive emotions, strengthening personal capabilities and creating meaning in life; in other words, focusing on one’s strengths and abilities, as well as contributing to others (Seligman, 2002). According to Seligman (2002), focusing on one’s strengths rather than on one’s weaknesses empowers individuals and allows them to create a positive rapport between themselves and their surroundings. If we apply this model to the current research, the mentor student is not seen as a “problematic” student, but rather as a person who contributes to society. Being aware of one’s strengths and positive attributes would likely be empowering, such that the student feels more positive and motivated in his/her life. Thus, in the current study, we employed the model of positive psychotherapy, as well as helper theory, to create a therapeutic tool for empowering students with special needs.

**Methods**

***Intervention Program***

In the intervention program that was examined, mentors are students with special needs. Mentors and mentees are matched in such a way that the mentors’ strengths can compensate for the mentees’ difficulties. For example, students with a high GPA (above 85) in their first year are paired with students who have learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia). Students, who at their interview with the program coordinator, expressed resilience and an ability to support others are paired with students who are in need of emotional assistance. Mentoring took place twice a week and included motivational and emotional support, as well as academic assistance. During the program, the mentors themselves continued to receive support from the centre.

***Participants***

Participants included (*n* = 17) second- and third-year undergraduate students with special needs (6 males; 11 females) who received support from the support centre of their academic college. All participants were mentees in a mentoring program and were from various departments across campus. Since our goal was to examine the therapeutic effectiveness of being a mentor within a peer mentoring program (Reisman 1965), only students who were not involved in any other psychological therapy during the year in which they were mentors were included in the study.

***Data Collection Approach***

When studying the experiences of people with special needs, qualitative methods are frequently used. These methods provide a closer look into the intricacies of their disabilities and their life experiences within a social context. A case study is a research design that is used for studying a phenomenon systematically. Such a design allows the researcher to make inferences about an individual’s perceptions and interpretations based on personal stories (Tzabar, 2001). Case studies offer the subjects’ personal motivation that guides their actions and behavior (Stake, 2000), illuminate our understanding of the specific phenomenon under investigation, and allow us to make generalizations about human behavior (Tzabar, 2001). The case study provides a rich, vivid and detailed description of a particular case and its context (Patton, 2002).

Interviewing is a qualitative research technique that is typically used when studying a relatively small number of respondents. Through interviews, participants can describe their attitudes and beliefs regarding a particular program or situation. Interviews examine phenomena in their natural settings and are useful when the goal is to gather information on individuals’ interpretations of a particular topic and the meanings that they attribute to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks all participants the same core questions to facilitate data collection (Gaskel, 2011). The interviewer may also ask for elaborations to gain a more thorough understanding of the participants’ responses or request clarifications when there is a misunderstanding (Einat & Chen, 2012). This flexibility of asking follow-up questions based on participants’ responses contributes to the credibility of the data gained through the interview (Einat & Chen, 2012). Interviews employ a phenomenological approach by which the researcher remains true to the perspectives of the respondents (Welman & Kruger, 1999) while avoiding his/her own preconceived biases (Groenewald, 2004).

***Procedures and Measures***

The interviews were held on campus or in another place that was convenient for the students. Prior to each interview, the interviewer informed interviewees that their responses would be recorded and transcribed. Interviewees were asked to sign a consent form to indicate their willingness to take part in the study. After interview completion, the recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed for thematic categories.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and included the following questions:

* What is your life story? What are your challenges or difficulties in life?
* Can you tell me about your academic experience before becoming a mentor?
* What is mentoring all about? How does mentoring affect your emotional and psychological well-being?
* Does mentoring affect other areas of your life?
* Do you think that mentoring has changed the course of your life?
* Do you think that mentoring will impact your future life?
* Do you think that the role of mentor makes you feel more confident?

***Data Analysis Strategy***

**Results**

Three central themes emerged from the interviews: (1) self-esteem improvements, (2) increases in self-efficacy and (3) feelings of empowerment.

***Theme 1: Self-esteem***

Sense of self is defined as the subjective evaluation of oneself, including one’s thoughts, opinions and attitudes. A positive sense of self includes feelings such as self-acceptance, personal approval and self-love, and increases as a result of self-appreciation of oneself (Adams & Gullota, 1989). Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs ([2003](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR2)) found a positive, although weak, correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement. However, they noted that higher self-esteem appeared to trigger higher aspirations, which may subsequently lead to greater academic achievements. In fact, other researchers found that students with a greater sense of self-esteem had a higher college GPA and better capacity to adapt to the social and emotional changes that occur during the transition to college (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, [2012](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR1)). On the other hand, students with low self-esteem levels were more prone to feeling disengaged from the academic experience (Zeigler-Hill et al., [2013](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR23)).

In the present study, many of the participants explicitly referred to the self-esteem boost that they experienced as a result of their role as mentors.

J: Mentoring has taught me how to be accountable for my actions and has developed a greater sense of responsibility in me. I used to work at a gas station, and sometimes when I didn’t feel like going to work, I just cancelled at the last minute. Now that I know that there’s a child waiting for me and is counting on me to help, I never cancel. I am accountable for my behaviour and I feel better. Now I know that if I begin a process, I need to finish it. And this makes me feel good about myself... Mentoring has reinforced my self-esteem and self-confidence because I see that I am important to someone, and it gives me a boost to keep on working with that child.

Si: I feel good about myself and I finished my studies summa cum laude. I believe that this excellence is the result of the mentoring program I was involved in for three years. Mentoring provided a certain structure. And when my day is structured, I am more efficient. I motivated them all the time and at the same time I motivated myself. When you give, you receive.

E: The fact that I became a possible candidate to become a mentor in a program in which I was a mentee did something positive to me. It makes me feel good about myself. I feel proud. When I see my mentee improving and getting good grades, it feels as if I am the one getting these grades…I feel real satisfaction. I am accountable for her.

O: After I became part of the program and had to be responsible for other people, I felt a change coming and actually started to walk around the campus like everybody else. I even went to the cafeteria to buy coffee, something that never happened before since I was always treated as the physically disabled student who needed help. The moment I became a mentor, I turned from a child who kept demanding and demanding to a parent who is responsible for others.

These accounts illustrate how the mentoring experience enabled the mentors to change their self-perceptions from people who relied on others and were viewed by others as needy and weak, to people who were accountable not only for their own lives but for the lives of others. The fact that they were finally able to believe in themselves and their abilities while, at the same time, accepting their disabilities was a major step in reaching self-satisfaction.

***Theme 2: Self-efficacy***

A significant finding of this study related to the mentors’ perception of their abilities (i.e., their self-efficacy). Self-efficacy is a person’s assessment of his/her skills and competency to plan and implement the course of action required to achieve a predetermined goal (Bandura, 1986). When facing challenges, students with high levels of self-efficacy find alternatives and are able to access their different emotional and cognitive abilities in order to overcome difficult situations (Bandura, 1997).

Participants in the mentoring program reported a considerable change to their self-efficacy. Mentors whose initial beliefs in their abilities were very low, and who had low expectations regarding their capacity to succeed in life, felt that once they entered the program they were capable of helping others, in addition to themselves.

O: I felt I was influencing others and I saw the positive impact from week to week, and from lesson to lesson. I saw it in the messages they sent me, and in their grades that improved. That was when I realized that if I could affect others, I have the ability to do the same for myself.

After completing my studies, I was accepted to a special program for inspectors of the IRS [income tax] which is considered very difficult.

Indeed, O completed his studies in Economics and graduated cum laude.

Ei: Mentoring developed my responsibility for others because I had to help my mentee hand in papers on time and be on time for our meetings.

Ef: My whole life I was used to receiving help from others (in school, the army, and even here in college from the support centre) and this [mentoring] is the first time that I am able to give to someone. I am no longer the one who always needs help, I am able to contribute and give to others… For me, it is, WOW. It’s fun to be able to help somebody.

Students also reported that the changes to their feelings of self-efficacy also had an impact on their personal lives.

J: Before I entered the mentoring program, I had a hard time connecting with people. I used to look for jobs as a private tutor that did not require facing and interacting with many people at once. Now, I feel I am able to work and become part of a formal institution that addresses many people.

Si: I personally feel that mentoring is a life changing experience. Mentoring changed me. It taught me how to be more patient, be tolerant of others, and to be able to listen to others’ needs, wishes and opinions. I now understand that I can connect with others, to be tolerant of their opinions and needs, and this made me understand that I can connect with a spouse the same way I learnt to connect with my mentee.

Of course there were difficult days for both of us [Si and the mentees], but it still gave me the ability to understand the right perspective in life. I had two mentees and, in addition to the hardships in their studies, they had to deal with financial problems (which I didn’t have) and, if they can deal with these difficulties and still study, I can definitely be an excellent student. I have all the resources to succeed.

D: Mentoring gave me the ability to open up to another person. Most people see me as shy or a snob, but this isn’t really me. I am just an introvert…. The fact that I was able to teach another person gave me the experience I need in the future. But the most important thing is that it taught me how to open up to others. Mentoring was a long-term process that allowed me to be open emotionally to someone and express myself. I am still not a complete extrovert, but I’m on my way. I have managed to open myself up to others and this, in and of itself, is worth all the effort and involvement I put into mentoring.

E: It also helped me organize my time better because I knew I had to integrate many things in my life as well as in hers. People always told me I can teach well, but the fact that my mentee got high grades attested to my abilities. When she had an exam in statistics, my mentee was so scared she thought she was going to fail. Eventually she received the highest grade in class. I was really proud. I walked around like a peacock, like I owned the world.

Based on participant responses, it appeared that the increase in self-efficacy that the mentors gained from their experiences, and the new belief that they had in themselves and their abilities, directly influenced the goals that they set for themselves (in relationships, health and academics) and the strategies they used to achieve these goals.

***Theme 3: Empowerment***

The third theme that arose from the accounts of the mentors was the notion of empowerment. Empowerment is a sense of power within an individual or group, which allows them to exercise relative control in different situations and aspects in life (Parsons, 1988; Peterson & Hughey, 2002). Two types of empowerment emerged from the analysis of participants’ responses: (1) an internal empowerment and (2) an external empowerment. Internal empowerment included descriptions in which the act of mentoring enabled the student to learn more about himself/herself, his/her strengths and abilities. External empowerment was experiences as a result of feedback that mentors received from their environment, including from the mentees themselves, their parents, and teachers.

*Internal Empowerment*

O: I matured. In the past I thought that I couldn’t give, I could only accept. Today, I know that the world needs me and that I have so much to give to others.

When I saw that I was affecting others, it made me realize that I can make the change in my own life, to grow despite my disability.

Si: Since I was injured, I have been living on my own relying on my handicap allowance and I got used to living this way. Through mentoring, and the close relationship I had with the mentees, I learnt to accept others’ opinions and attitudes which do not coincide with mine. Thanks to the close relationship I have had with my mentee, I realized I could develop a relationship with a spouse.

Tz: Mentoring empowered me because I understood that I was able to use simple techniques to teach and the mentee understood me.

These instances demonstrate the inner power that mentoring provided the mentors. Recognizing the fact that they could make a difference in other people’s lives gave them the will and strength to try to do the same for themselves.

*External Empowerment*

N: The mentee sends me a text message at night to make sure I am coming to the meeting the following day. And after each meeting, the mentee sends me a thank you message. This makes me feel important.

D: Every good grade the mentee receives, she tells me that she would have never gotten this grade without me. This really empowers me. Once I came to her house and her family told me that I was really appreciated, and they were really happy I was working with her. It gave me a good feeling.

Ei: Every good grade the mentee receives makes me feel like a peacock.

Si: I don’t expect anything…I just give. It’s like I give others and the universe or something repays you by power. You motivate others and you become stronger, so this mentoring is simply changing people. It shows you different people with different disabilities, and this gives you a better perspective of your life. I feel that every student needs to participate in a mentoring program, even for one semester.

At the end of the mentoring program, the participants reported feeling more empowered, both through their own eyes and in the eyes of those around them. They felt more confident in their strengths and abilities to achieve future goals.

In summary, findings confirmed the empowerment theory, which proposes that every individual has strengths and competencies that can be exercised (Giddens, 1996; Saleebey, 2004). However, in order for individuals to realize their potential and experience success, they must have a positive self-perception, and a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which not only increases their autonomy (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), but also improves their problem-solving and decision-making skills (Rappaport & Seidman, 2000).

**Discussion**

This research examined the effects of mentoring among college students with special needs who are mentors to students who share similar predicaments. The main purpose of the study was to examine the benefits that mentors derive from their role, and explore whether mentoring could serve as a therapeutic tool for students with special needs.

Studying the effects of peer mentoring has been a topic of inquiry among disabled and non-disabled individuals (Brill, 1994; Einat, 2017). Benefits include increased self-esteem and self-confidence (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998), better academic achievements (Brill, 1994; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007), improved ability in forming close personal relationships and engaging in social interactions, and learning of new skills (Brill, 1994). Einat (2017) provided evidence as to the positive role of mentoring for mentors in the prison system. Through mentoring, mentor prisoners were able to discover their strengths and virtues, which were then reflected through positive influences on their motivation, relationships with prison staff, and self-healing.

In line with previous research, three themes emerged from the personal accounts of the mentors. The first theme involved the positive effects of mentoring on the self-esteem of the student mentors. Mentoring enabled these students to uncover their personal capabilities and strengths. Instead of taking the role of a person in need and feeling dependent on the system for help, they were able to provide help to others.According to the mentors’ testimonies, the fact that they were able to use their strengths and abilities to help others had an immensely positive influence on their self-esteem. In addition, changing roles from a recipient of help to someone who gives back to society, and whose opinion counts, elevated their feelings of validation and increased their motivation to keep helping their mentees. This finding is in agreement with the helper theory (Reisman, 1965), which emphasizes the positive effects of helping others and the positive influence that helping has on one’s self-image. Additionally, findings reflected Seligman’s (2002) theory of positive psychology, which stresses the need for strengthening individuals’ unique strengths, rather than improving their weaknesses.

An additional theme that emerged from the interviews was the mentors’ improved self-efficacy. When the mentors witnessed their own success with their mentees, they started to believe in their own abilities to attain their goals in life, both academic and personal, and to trust that they would be able to overcome challenges in the future. Moreover, the student mentors often realized that in order to achieve their goals in life, they may have to modulate their behavior, and they expressed their willingness to make efforts to change. Further, when mentors reached particular goals and experienced success, they felt more motivated to tackle other challenges in life, such as in the academic domain and in forming close relationships (even with a spouse). In fact, Bandura (1997) argues that people high in self-efficacy are better able to cope with and bounce back from challenges in life. Indeed, all students in the program completed their academic studies, many reported finding a job in their field, and others even reported that they were successful in forming relationships with a spouse.

Finally, mentors reported feeling empowered after their experience in the peer mentoring program. Mentors reflected on aspects of both internal and external empowerment, which they experienced as a direct consequence of their mentoring role. Their service, and the significance they attached to their service, made them feel more powerful. Empowerment is expressed through different levels. On the personal level, empowerment can be felt through an ability to be active and to control events in one’s own life. On an organizational level, empowerment can be experienced through recognizing one’s ability to function as a member of an organization or social network, in which one acquires relevant resources, improves efficiency and reaches one’s goals. Further, on the community level, empowerment can be reflected through one’s ability to be a functioning member of a community, through meaningful engagement in community activities and a focus on the community’s needs (Rappaport & Seidman, 2000). Indeed, participants expressed that they used their knowledge, as well as their virtues and strengths, to achieve the higher goal of adding value to others’ lives. In addition, receiving validation and acknowledgement from their mentees and their families served as a means of external empowerment that helped them view themselves as successful. When the mentors saw that their mentoring helped others in scholastic aptitude, as well as in emotional growth, they felt empowered.

Since mentors had to be responsible for someone else, it motivated them to improve their own lives. Mentoring allowed them to practice their communication skills and strengthen their social skills. For example, participants who described themselves as introverts before entering the mentoring program, reported feeling more at ease communicating with others after the program. Mentors felt they were better equipped to confront problems in their own lives, since they had experienced solving the problems of others. When success followed, and they received acknowledgement and validation from others, it empowered them. The mentors described mentoring as the desire to pass along the great deed that they had previously received as mentees.

***Implications***

These findings indicate that initiating an intervention program in which students with special needs become “service providers” may empower them, improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy and may lead them to be more responsible for themselves and for others. These findings support the idea that a peer mentoring intervention program may be a useful therapeutic tool for students with special needs.

***Limitations***

This study has two major caveats that need to be addressed in future research. The first caveat involves the population in the study. Since the study was qualitative, only a small number of participants were recruited (*n* = 17). A larger number of participants may provide a broader picture of the effects that mentoring has on mentors, and may also illuminate additional benefits that were not uncovered in this study. Moreover, a wider range of populations might reveal a different picture. The study focused on students who were admitted to higher education institutions. It is reasonable to assume that these students already had a certain level of resilience since they were able to overcome the hurdles of their disabilities and enroll in college.

The second caveat involves the method through which data was gathered. The study used a semi-structured interview technique, which relies solely on the accounts of the participants. The participants may have been influenced by what they believed to be expected from them and what is socially acceptable. In addition, participants were already part of the mentoring program, which may have influenced their attitudes toward volunteering and their motivation to help others.

***Future research***

Future research should examine a wider range of people who are not students. Future research might also include a mixed-method approach, combining both interviews and questionnaires that would assess participants before and after enrolment in the peer mentoring program.

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