Nurturing Lifelong Readers: The Power of Near-Peer Mentoring for Young Adolescents and Their Mentors

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Abstract

In a program known as the Secret Society of Readers, college mentors supported young adolescent mentees with wide-reading opportunities, modeled reading behaviors, talk about books, and support for navigating the complexities of school and life. Our study focused on the use of mentored reading for expanding ways of conceptualizing literacy, positively shaping attitudes towards reading, and supporting reader identity development. Our team took a case study approach in order to better understand the program and improve it for future iterations (Stake, 1995). We found near-peer relationships were central, group dynamics truly matter, reader interests and identities were key, reader identities evolved, and time proved both structural and relational. In this article, we offer an account of the program we designed and implemented, what we learned from the experiences, and ways in which others may take this school and university partnership approach of mentored wide-reading to nurture lifelong readers.

A DREAM

It's Friday! As the doors open to the library, you can hear a rustle of noise as a group of 6th grade students enter with their lunch and backpacks and scan the room looking for their mentor. Carolina sees her 6th grade mentee and waves her over to the table that holds a collection of books that she hand selected to share with her mentee. Having finished the last book they were reading together, Carolina decides to offer her mentee a range of book choices for their next read. She selects titles for various reasons, a novel that was meaningful to her during her own middle school experience, a fiction title based on what her mentee was learning about in Social Studies, and a novel based on a conversation they had about her mentee's interests. As the mentee sits down but before Carolina begins to share about each book, authentic conversation begins occurring between the mentor and mentee. Carolina checks in with her mentee about how her school day is going, how her family is doing, and anything new in her life. Their conversation turns to books; first they choose the next book to read, then relate the choice to their lives. As her mentee eats her lunch, Carolina begins reading the book, providing a model of fluent reading while her mentee hangs on every word. Then, the mentee begins reading and Carolina listens with intent, offering support in pronunciation and clarifications as needed, and continuing their authentic conversation from before. As the meeting session comes to an end, Carolina begins to wrap up the session for the day. She reviews for her mentee what they accomplished during the meeting. Together, they decide on a reading goal for their next meeting. As her mentee packs up and leaves the library, Carolina smiles as she reflects on their time together, realizing what a special time it is for her mentee, but also how special it was for her.

Mary Kay and Joe Henson (all other names are pseudonyms) had a dream— to provide underserved students opportunities to discover the power of reading. These donors contacted their local university, which worked to create a partnership with a Title I middle school in their community. Before the 2022-2023 school year, the program coordinators, two university faculty in Education, met with school leaders and worked to design a program that utilized a mentoring to foster a lifelong love of reading for a targeted group of 6th grade middle school students by moving beyond a skill-based approach and explore how university student mentors could provide support and encouragement around reading. We aimed to foster learning that is active and democratic (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) by providing individual and personal attention to the interests, abilities, and concerns of the young

adolescents in the program. The use of wide reading strategies, which incorporates a variety of text types and topics, allowed us to attend to these individual preferences. By framing reading as active and democratic, we aimed to highlight real-world purposes for reading and engaging with books, beyond skills-based tasks for school.

The combined team established a group known as the Secret Society of Readers, an inclusive space with program goals of inspiring a love of reading through choice and wide reading, and as a safe space for middle school students to feel a sense of belongingness. The 6th grade students selected to be part of this program were identified by school leadership as students whose attendance was consistent and could also benefit from extra support and encouragement in reading.

In addition to research capacity and program coordination functions, the university's involvement with the program offered direct access to university-age students who served as near-peer mentors to 6th grade mentees. Near-peer mentoring, or cross-age peer mentoring, is a concept that has been introduced previously as similar programs have been used to foster growth but have not always focused on using college students as mentors (Karcher, 2005). By fostering meaningful connections between near-peer mentors and young adolescent mentees, our program creates a space where mentees' cultural identities and personal experiences are acknowledged and validated. Our program focuses on a relational approach, which we see as empowering mentees to engage with literacy in ways that can reflect their lived realities. Similar to middle grades research that suggests the importance of adult advocates in supporting the academic and personal development of young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), near-peer mentors may also be a powerful way to support student development. Further, having a mentor who is a near-peer may have mutual benefits such as "strengthened leadership skills, increased self-awareness, a gained sense of responsibility for others, and overall stronger feelings of confidence" for both mentors and mentees (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 2). We also anticipated that near-peer mentors would provide a next life-stage model for mentees in forming lifelong connections with reading. These near-peer relationships between university students and middle school students proved a crucial aspect of the success of the Secret Society of Readers.

Recruitment for the near-peer mentors began with social media blasts, on-campus communication screens, and targeted advertisements through the learning management system at the local university. University students who answered the call came from various backgrounds and majors, including psychology, criminology, medical fields, and education. With the varying backgrounds of the university students, the university research team and school leaders designed an initial two days of professional development for academic understanding and socio-emotional learning. Then, one day a week, the university-age mentors went to the school for lunch and one class period with their middle school mentees. Mentors provided mentees with wide reading opportunities, modeled reading behaviors, read together, talked about books and other readings, and supported mentees as they navigated the complexities of middle school. Throughout the program, the two university faculty members and two doctoral students working as research assistants provided specific additional professional development sessions based on feedback from mentors and school leadership.

We offer our learning through the lens of mentors in the pilot iteration of the Secret Society of Readers to encourage others to partner with local institutions of higher education, public schools, and caring community donors to design and implement creative approaches to support middle school youth.

Connections to the Literature

Our program focused on using mentored wide reading to expand ways of conceptualizing reading, promote positive attitudes towards reading, and develop readers' identities. Our study focused on understanding mentors' perceptions of the successes and challenges with the Secret Society of Readers and improving the program. We wanted to ensure mentors and mentees cultivated a sense that their worldview could be and *should be* informed by a variety of texts as they continue to grow in their reader identities. Also, we frame sociocultural aspects of our pilot project through affect theory (Boldt & Leander, 2020). Traditional reading and intervention programs often found in schools focus on assessment data, leveled performances, improvement on standardized texts, and decoding while narrowly focusing on "what counts as reading and as a reader into knowable, quantifiable terms" (Boldt & Leander, p. 525).

Our mentees could decode; therefore, we focused on how middle schoolers might feel about their mentors, their texts, and the Secret Society of Readers space.

The choice to partner young adolescent learners with near-peer university-age mentors was based on previous research that indicates near-peer mentoring can provide powerful opportunities for social and academic support (see e.g., Qua, et al., 2020). Near-peer mentorship can provide a unique and mutually-beneficial relationship for young adolescent mentees and their near-age mentors. Tenenbaum et al. (2017) found that young adolescents largely enjoyed working with near-peer mentors. Specifically, "their closeness in age made them relatable and able to teach concepts in a way that was fun and understandable" (Tenenbaum et al., p. 7). In addition to developing positive rapport with mentees, near-peer mentors provided guidance in education and life lessons (Tenenbaum et al.). In a related study of near-peer mentoring between middle and high school students mentored by university students, Tenenbaum et al. found "the near-peer mentorship model offers personal, educational, and professional benefits for near-peer mentors and increases the interest and engagement of [mentees]" (p. 382-3).

To support the development of relationships around books and reading, our mentors were provided with materials for professional learning which served as anchor texts for the program, including Donalyn Miller's (2009) *The Book Whisperer* in the first semester, and Miller's *Reading in the Wild* (2014) in the second semester. In *The Book Whisperer*, Miller details an approach to supporting reading she enacted in her own classroom, wherein young readers are encouraged to explore their interests through wide reading and develop their own intrinsically-motivated reading habits. In *Reading in the Wild* (2014), Miller offers additional theoretically-grounded practical advice for supporting youth to become lifelong readers. We highlighted major aims of the books and possible applications of mentored choice reading and wide reading in our program during our professional learning sessions. Mentors also received a folder of supplemental materials, including research and practitioner articles, and specific handouts to support pedagogical development.

Research Questions

1. How does a donor-funded program support middle school readers with university-age mentors?
2. In what ways does the program impact interests and attitudes towards literacies and lifelong learning for university-age mentors?
3. What can be learned from the pilot iteration of the program for future iterations?

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Our team took a case study approach (Stake, 1995) to better understand the program and grow from successes and challenges for future iterations. At the conclusion of the pilot year of the program, the research team invited program mentors to share their responses to reflective questions. Similar to previous research (e.g., Heirdsfield et al., 2008), the team wanted to hear from the mentors so their feedback would inform the development of future program iterations.

We determined that conducting interviews of the mentors of our program would be the best way to gain as much insight of the mentors' experiences in the program as possible. Based on previous research we decided to have two stages of interviews, focus groups and individual interviews lasting no more than 60 minutes. The focus group interviews would offer the opportunity for the mentors to hear each other's thoughts, experiences, and could give support to share their ideas in a group setting, while the individual interviews provided individualized feedback and situations.

We valued the mentors' experience from the program both in a group setting, through a focus group interview, and individually. We designed a protocol for the semi-structured focus group setting with a list of interview questions. We asked questions such as, "How would you characterize your conversations around your book choices/SSR time?"; "How do you and your mentee choose which books to read?"; "Please describe your best SSR meeting. What made it so special?"; and "What kinds of routines or special rituals have you established during your SSR time with your mentee?" These questions were developed early in the study and revised as the study progressed. We decided that the project research assistants would conduct the interviews, and depending on the number of mentors consenting to participate in the study,

we would have two separate focus groups. Then, after the focus groups would conclude, individual interviews would be optional for the mentors to decide if they had any other insights or feedback for us that we did not discuss in the focus group.

During our final meeting of the year, the mentors were given the opportunity to meet in a separate space for a focus group interview. Of the 24 mentors working in the program, 11 consented to be part of the study. Ten of those 11 mentors attended in-person focus group interviews. One participant could not attend in person and, instead, shared their reflections during an individual interview, conducted via Zoom at a later date. Eight of the focus group mentors shared additional insights through an optional individual interview. All interviews were video recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai.

Multiple rounds of coding the transcriptions were conducted by the university research team. The first round was conducted individually by the research assistants, each coding the focus group they conducted. They coded quotes from the mentors that conveyed key or recurring themes aimed at both the program components and their experiences with their individual mentees. For the second round of coding, the research assistants and a third member of the research team worked asynchronously in a shared document to make sense of and define those key points. As we coded these key ideas, we identified which points were stated, reinforced, repeated, and extended by other focus group members. After doing this individually, we worked together to sort key themes into large categories of 'relationships' and 'structures' from these initial findings. Then, we independently synthesized categories by selecting descriptive phrases that exemplified the relationships and program structures. These categorical interpretations supported the team to discuss and define insights related to the descriptive phrases from the focus group conversations echoed in individual interviews. No additional categories were identified in the individual interview transcripts. Our observations and experiences with participants throughout the program implementation also served as data points to help us make sense of the interview data. Finally, as a group, we aligned our collapsed categories and drafted five synthesized thematic assertions in a correspondence table (Stake, 1995). These five

assertions were brought to the fifth member of our university research team, a doctoral student who was a mentor and a participant in the study. As a component of member checking, she confirmed the five assertions were accurate representation.

Limitations

This pilot study offered a view into the potential this program can afford the middle grade students and university-age mentors. This particular study focused solely on the mentors' perspective. We experienced difficulties due to the implementation of the study within a school year. We initially strived to collect data from the middle grade students, their families, and their teachers. However, we did not receive any completed consent forms for these potential groups before the school year ended. We aim for future research studies to include mentees' perspectives, which are invaluable in understanding the near-peer mentoring framework.

Assertions

Assertion 1: Near-Peer Relationships Are Central.

> ...*Not only did we help them grow their love for reading, and help with some reading skills here and there, but they knew that they had someone to talk to, and we could reach out and help out. (Summer)*

Near-peer relationships between the middle school 6th-grade mentees and the university mentors are central. Because of their proximity in age, mentors were able to connect with middle school students in ways that may be less accessible to teachers and other school personnel. The mentors did not act as authority figures. Instead, they used the time together to connect and build mutually beneficial bonds. Mentors listened to middle schoolers share their day-to-day experiences, struggles, and successes. They helped guide and support the mentees by sharing their own middle school experiences that, because they are a near-peer, were not that long ago. Through these highly personal interactions, both mentors and mentees were able to develop bonds with each other. Mentors shared their "mentees would look forward to every Friday" and were "excited for *me* to be there." They looked forward to sharing with their

mentor about their personal and academic lives, successes and challenges they faced at home and school.

Working to identify their mentees' reading interests (e.g., history, fiction, poetry, etc.) and personal interests (e.g., video games, pop culture, art, or sports) while also connecting to other interests strengthened the mutual bond. As one example, the discovery of a mutual love of art between one middle school mentee with growing but limited English proficiency and her mentor, Elizabeth (a monolingual English speaker), led to communication and bonding through a variety of artistic forms. During a focus group conversation, Elizabeth shared her experience with our research team:

> I figured it would be easy to start off with a drawing...she's really into art and likes anime and manga. My personal favorite horror manga artist is Gingy Ito and he's recently gained a lot of popularity...and it's like, hey, let me see if I can find a kid-friendly version of one of his books...hence, Gingy Ito's Cat Diary–a funny, creepy version that's kind of meant for all ages that I thought would be perfect. And she really loved that one!

Through one-on-one pairing, mentors recognized each of their mentees as individuals and as "special" and "unique" readers.

Mentors, as near peers, provided the mentees with a person who could be a friend who still set high expectations for learning. Our findings also suggest mentors benefited from the near-peer relationship, both professionally and personally (Haggard et al., 2011; Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Two mentors involved in the program, who were not Education majors, made shifts toward the profession by taking on paid jobs in local schools or looking into graduate degree programs in Education. The relationships between mentees and mentors were central to the program.

Assertion 2: Group Dynamics Matter.

> *Once we started to combine groups, I noticed she opened up a little bit more. (Summer)*

Initially, the program began with one mentor and one mentee working together. Due to multiple factors, we shifted to a two-mentors to three-mentees model halfway through the school

year. The driving force behind this change in structure was due mainly to absences and a desire to increase the number of mentees participating in the program. In the one-to-one model, mentees or mentors could sometimes be found sitting alone when their counterpart was absent. Additionally, the semester change between fall and spring altered the dynamics of groupings, as some mentors could not return to the project due to scheduling conflicts.

The change in dynamics caused some unintended shifts in each group. Some changes worked out for the better, while others left groups with challenges in their relationships. For groups that thrived under this new model, one mentor noted the larger group encouraged some quiet mentees to speak up. The dynamic seemed to afford other quiet mentees opportunities to listen and build on what other group members shared.

Mentor feedback shows that groupings must be intentional, and many factors must be considered in this program. Groupings were identified as an element of the program that were both relational and structural. One mentor suggested, "I would do the two-on-three system or the group system near-peer from the beginning...[rather than] having a transition... that was actually very good to have [another] mentor with me..." (Patrick). When developing groupings of near-peer mentors and young mentees, the group dynamics are essential to consider, not only developmental reading levels and interests but also personalities (e.g., Drew et al., 2000; Karcher & Berger, 2017). One mentor noted, "[the groupings] can help motivate, but they can also hurt others" (Lilly).

Assertion 3: Time is Structural and Relational.

> *[We] definitely need more time, especially if more students join. (Cindy)*

Through our mentor interviews, a common thread that emerged was *time*, and how it impacted all aspects of the program. Time is a complex structure, especially in a school setting where this program took place. Our mentors had lunch plus one period to meet with their mentees on Fridays. Several mentors noted that more was needed and would like the program to be expanded for more Secret Society of Readers

time, either with additional days or longer periods of time for each meeting.

The meeting day for the Secret Society of Readers program was Friday. Friday was selected for many reasons. University course scheduling is typically lighter on Fridays, providing greater availability for university students to participate as mentors. Additionally, Friday was the first choice of the middle school administration for our mentors to be on their campus. However, hosting the program on Fridays was challenging, as many holidays and school events occurred on Fridays. These alterations in the mentees' schedule and pervasive excitement around these activities often affected the mentees' focus during the Secret Society of Readers meeting time or caused absenteeism from the program. Due to the constraints in scheduling during the school day and the school year's finite nature, we could not identify additional time for mentors and mentees to spend together during this project's first iteration.

We noted time also had a significant influence on relationships. Relationships with mentees require trust. Trust in a relationship takes consistency over time, different for each individual and each group (Donlan et al., 2017). During their time in the program, the mentors' consistency was vital to building trust with their mentees. By showing up each week, taking a genuine interest in the mentees' lives, and "following through," the mentors build trust with their mentees, with many of the mentor-mentee groups developing strong bonds with each other. Mentors shared that their mentees did not want them to leave at the end of the program and repeatedly asked if the program would continue into the following school year. One mentor reflected on her time with her mentees, saying, "I'm really going to miss them, we've seen these kids grow… this year. Are they doing okay? Are they reading? Making good choices?" (Lilly).

Assertion 4: Sharing Authentic Reading Experiences Built Relationships.

> *Turns out we had very similar interests. (Lilly)*

By learning about each other's reader identities and building relationships through weekly meetings, mentors and mentees chose books that aligned with their interests, sometimes by "trial and error" or trying a book and abandoning it if needed. Because there was no expectation of what "counted" as reading and no grades associated with the reading, mentees could take risks they may have been less likely to take if there was pressure to finish everything they started. Mentors reflected on their conversations with mentees, sharing words of wisdom like "it's okay to abandon books sometimes" and indicating that they always had "a backup book" as an alternative. Mentors made recommendations based on their own experiences, individual mentee interests, and often chose books not typically part of school curriculum.

While some mentees easily shared their interests, other conversations developed in a different way. The focus on choosing books and making selections based on interests helped deepen many of the relationships. One mentor noted that she and her mentee "both like thrillers", so she found a book that she had "loved" as a child and recommended it to the mentee, which the mentee chose to read. Another mentor noted that she was reading *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and they organically began a conversation about the mentee's interest in the Holocaust. These experiences with a topic of interest or a particular book supported the mentor/mentee relationship to develop on a personal level, connecting books and reading to positive feelings.

We kept reader interest as a focal point for selecting books. As one mentor reminded her mentees to recognize, "There are more books than you know; it's not just the classics" (Patrick). By selecting books that were of personal interest to the mentees, mentors were able to affirm their mentee's confidence in their own reader identities, which in turn created space for mentees to improve their reading skills by actually reading. As one mentor noted, they felt they inspired a love of reading, a key goal of the program.

Assertion 5: Reader Identities Evolve.

> *Don't be embarrassed about being a reader…you can make so many connections…with your love of reading.*

(Summer)

Throughout the program, strong relationships formed in many groups. Mentors supported the mentees as they navigated their interests in sports, arts, music, history, or video games and incorporated them into their selected books. Mentors encouraged mentees as they developed their reader autonomy and agency in choosing books they wanted to read or abandon, supporting mentees in wide reading opportunities. The mentors worked to show mentees what reading can be: personal, relevant, engaging, and informative.

We also noted that reader identities evolved for the mentors. Many mentors conveyed they had not read many books for pleasure in a long time. One mentor stated, "I used to walk out of the library with big stacks of books. But…time goes on… you have less time to find those moments to read." Once mentors recognized their own struggles with finding time to read, they made connections to how many of their mentees faced similar issues in their home lives that affected the amount of time they spent reading for pleasure. Mentors were encouraged to talk with mentees to find "sneaky moments" throughout their day when they could read whatever they chose. By demonstrating and recommending wide reading and fostering connections between their mentees and books, many mentors rediscovered their love of reading. Mentors would browse the library shelves in search of a book to recommend for their mentee and come across a title from their childhood. When mentors shared those beloved books from their younger years with their mentees, it often led to conversations about the book and why they loved it.

All mentees in the program knew how to read, yet not all identified as readers. The mentors modeled their own reading identities, which may help mentees see themselves as readers, a critical factor in their enjoyment, engagement, and success in reading (Hall, 2016). Reader identity can be established or enriched through the development of strong relationships, intentional groupings, keeping reader interest at the forefront, and having time to develop the program and the relationships of those involved.

Final Thoughts

Guthrie et al. (2005) convey that intrinsic motivation can be supported by giving reading choice, collaborating with others, and

interacting with challenging texts. Our study indicates near-peer mentors provided middle school students with an opportunity not typically available in a school setting. Even when the mentors and mentees faced challenges, mentors continued to develop unique bonds with their mentees, modeling stronger reader identity and a love of reading.

From this first iteration of the program, we learned about the five key assertions described above that impacted the program's success while identifying potential future improvements. In the second year of the program, we continued to utilize the support of near-peer mentors. This program feature has proven essential, providing middle school students someone to talk to and read with who is older but close enough in age and developmental stage to connect in familiar ways. When grouping mentors and mentees, we provided an opportunity for all participants to meet one another before groups are formed, aiming for more organic groupings to occur based on initial interests and impressions of personalities. Once groups were established, we intentionally facilitated sharing interests for mentees and mentors. This helped mentors make book recommendations while building strong relationships. We see this work as an aspect of culturally responsive literacy impacting reader identity (Francois, 2023). Independent reading can be a way for diverse adolescent youth to foster their own reading identities. Youth can connect to books with characters who look like them or have the same experiences as them. Engagement with reading can be the result of a socially interactive environment that allows mentees time to engage with books in meaningful ways. These opportunities to engage with reading and social identities is a result of mentees' interactions with their near-peer mentors.

In the second iteration of the program, because we could not access more time for the Secret Society of Readers during the school day, we worked to build a longitudinal approach to the program, looping to seventh grade with mentees from the pilot, expanding the Secret Society of Readers to a new group of sixth graders, and engaging with fifth-grade mentees at the elementary schools that feed to our partner middle school. Additionally, we added structures and scaffolding to the Secret Society of Readers' time, including the intentional utilization of notebooks and a driving question of the week. We provided ongoing professional learning to

our mentors to respond to their questions and challenges while supporting them to make the most of their time with mentees. This professional learning time also provided space for our mentors in the program to connect with each other around big ideas like what was working for them as they supported their mentees, what challenges they faced as mentors, and special topics to continue developing their understandings of robust literacy and reading experiences. The goal of the program was to create a lifelong love of reading, and we have seen some measure of success with this for both the mentees and mentors.

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