Peer Mentoring for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Examining Relationship Dynamics

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Peer mentoring is a well-established tool for supporting college students, and it often yields strong benefits (Budge, 2006; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Much of the research to date has examined characteristics of mentors or mechanisms to support mentees. Little of that research focuses on the use of peer mentoring for college students with intellectual disabilities (ID).

This study used a framework (Pawson, 2004) that considers how dimensions of mentoring relationships may interact over time as contexts change by examining status, reference groups, and mentoring mechanisms.

- **Status** means- social standing and membership of the mentor/mentee in a particular environment (in this case, the college campus). A person can either have **insider, marginal**, or outsider **status**.

- **Reference groups** refers to– how mentors see their role in moving mentees toward full campus membership. Roles among mentors include **advocate** (more inclined to have mentees join them on activities in which the mentor is already an insider), **autonomous** (a more laissez-faire approach), and **antipathy** (an obstructionist – rarely seen). Roles for mentees include **aspirational** (motivated to change), **acquiescent** (content with their situation), and a**ntagonistic** (not invested in the relationship or program).

- **Mentoring mechanisms** –are methods used by mentors with mentees. These include **advocacy** (positional resources), coaching (aptitudinal resources), **direction setting** (cognitive resources), and **affective contacts** (emotional resources).

METHODS

SAMPLE
Participants included 18 undergraduate female students at a mid-Atlantic four-year institution of higher education. Every student was pursuing a disability studies minor and had enrolled in a three-credit course on mentoring in one of three consecutive semesters. Mentored students with ID were enrolled in a two-year certificate program at the

same university and had requested a mentor.

During the mentoring course, undergraduate students read and discussed a variety of topics related to students with ID, mentoring, and person-centered planning. Then they observed and participated alongside students with ID in certificate program activities. Course instructors then matched undergraduate and certificate students based on shared interest and availability. For the remainder of the semester, undergraduate students engaged in mentoring activities with certificate students three hours each week for a minimum of 21 hours total.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
As part of the mentoring course, undergraduates submitted three types of assignments (discussion papers, mentoring logs, and mentor reflections), all of which were used in the analysis. Qualitative analyses were conducted using repeated processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion-drawing plus verification.

KEY FINDINGS

Mentoring Dimensions and Change

- Mentors perceived themselves as well-positioned to facilitate their partners in becoming college insiders, and mentees were seen as eager to connect with others on campus.

- Mentors described often using **coaching** and **direction setting** as mentoring mechanisms.

- Small gains were made in supporting mentees to move into a more insider status; dramatic shifts were not noted.

- While many mentors retained an insider status throughout their semester, their reference group changed, reflecting shifts in the mentoring relationship. In some situations, mentors shifted to an autonomous (less proactive) approach. Similarly, mentees were sometimes viewed as shifting from being aspirational to more acquiescent (less motivated to change).

MENTORS' REFLECTIONS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

The greatest shifts from "outsider" to "marginal" status among students with ID occurred when mentors listened closely to what the mentee hoped to accomplish and planned activities that focused on those goals. Additional shifts were noted when mentees seemed more open to learning and willing to take ownership of their goals by asking for help. As mentors learned to step back, mentees' gains were more evident.

The mentors sometimes found it difficult to navigate between being a friend and acting more as a professional in their mentor role. Mentors reported observing that others on campus were sometimes less accepting of students with ID. Identifying natural supports was not always easy.

LIMITATIONS

The mentor group was not very diverse; all students were female undergraduates minoring in disability studies (mentees were both male and female and with varied academic interests). Only the perspectives of the mentors were examined, and the mentees' observations and experiences may have been different. Finally, all data came from class assignments, which may have resulted in biased answers, since the students knew their papers would be graded. However, no bias was detected based on the responses and the challenges mentors were willing to share.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, several recommendations can be made to best utilize peer mentors in supporting students with ID.

1. Support mentors to maintain a focus on person-centered planning and self-determination.

2. Help mentors use their insider status and advocacy mechanisms to promote engagement for mentees.

3. Teach mentors strategies for developing natural supports and advocating successfully when they observe environments that are less inclusive.

The study also revealed possible adjustments to the peer mentoring course and future research:

1. Include both undergraduate and certificate students from the beginning.
2. Ensure that mentors and mentees have similar assignments involving reflection on general concepts, as well as tracking progress toward relationship goals.
3. Involve mentees and mentors in participatory research to gain new perspectives.
4. Explore ways to refine our operational definitions of mentoring dynamics.

Read more about this study: Culnane, M., Eisenman, L. T., & Murphy, A. (2016). College peer mentoring and students with intellectual disability: Mentors' perspectives on relationship dynamics. *Inclusion, (4)*4, 257–269.

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