Force for Good: The Value of High-Achieving University Students in Tutoring Struggling Younger Students in Underserved Communities

Garren Ferreira, Texas Tech University, United States
Aarsh Ray, Texas Tech University, United States
Adarsh Hullahalli, The University of Texas at Austin, United States

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Abstract

Disparities in education access have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Children in communities with less access to education often experience additional vulnerability outside the classroom, compounding the gap between their education and that of other children. Given the paramount role that education plays in personal development, disparities in education pose a threat to the future of communities. Drawing on prior research and the success of the Texas Tech University Honors College's Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program in Lubbock, Texas, we propose the intervention of partnering struggling students in impoverished communities with high-achieving university students in mentoring relationships that involve one-on-one academic tutoring as well as companionship. To represent the steps of the intervention, we propose the IPBMO model: "I" for Identify, "P" for partner, "B" for Befriend, "M" for Mentor, and "O" for Observe. In the Identify stage, students struggling academically or socially should be noticed. In the Partner stage, the identified student should be teamed up with a high-achieving university student whose personality matches the younger student's temperament well. In the Befriend stage, the university student and the younger student form a bond that increases trust between the two individuals. In the Mentor stage, the university student tutors and advises the younger student on school, all while continuing friendship development. In the Observe stage, any changes in the younger student's outcomes should be observed to ascertain the efficacy of the intervention. This model serves to be a good template to close the gap of disparities in education.

Keywords: Education Disparities, Mentoring, Tutoring

Introduction

The emergence of the novel coronavirus near the end of 2019 was an unforeseen disturbance of the global system, altering the day to day lives of people across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic ballooned the already present inequalities in societies and drew attention to these widening disparities (Darmody et al., 2021). Observations of these disparities yield the sobering understanding that the consequences of these turbulent changes are borne most heavily by those of lower socioeconomic status (Darmody et al., 2021). Neglecting the psychological and emotional toll, the job losses and the economic hardship disproportionately affected people of lower income and less education (Perry et al., 2021). This paper is concerned with the disparity in education that the drawn-out societal effects of the pandemic have fattened.

Education is a contextual phenomenon—the livelihood and education of the child are not isolated in a vacuum, but instead are existing in a broader nexus of factors (Darmody et al., 2021). The restrictions, social distancing, job losses, and other changes that accompanied the pandemic altered the fabric of many households, influencing the livelihoods of countless young adults and children, potentially changing their academic performance (Darmody et al., 2021). Additionally, the threat to people's lives by the pandemic posed a heavy psychological burden that was festered by the social isolation and could also potentially produce a decline in educational results (Engzell et al., 2021). Even before the pandemic, educational inequalities materialized because of the degree to which a student's scholastic endeavors could be supported by his or her family, the conduciveness of his or her home environment to these endeavors, and the amount of resources possessed by the family (Darmody et al., 2021). It makes sense then that a young student's socioeconomic background is a potent predictor for his or her scholastic success, and these gaps along socioeconomic lines emerge early in a child's academic career and do not typically shrink as the child progress through the education system (Darmody et al., 2021).

The already unlevel playing field in education was skewed more with the pandemic. Families with higher levels of education or from higher social classes were able to weather the pandemic better, with students from those families outperforming others likely because their households possessed better forms of the technologies needed for learning and parents from those households could likely afford to work from home, making it easier to help their children keep up with educational tasks (Darmody et al., 2021). Learning losses due to school closure were observed as being higher for students from less-educated families, perhaps because their parents were less capable of providing support under the looming dangers of economic uncertainty and the taxing nature of working from home (Engzell et al., 2021; Haelermans et al., 2022).

The existence of educational inequality amongst young students—and its exacerbation by the pandemic—is troubling because of correlations between education level and other aspects of an individual's future life. Education has become the primary path to "financial security, stable employment, and social success" (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018).The decrease in manufacturing jobs in America, coupled with globalization, and the significant returns of higher education have fostered the economic inequality that makes education increasingly more important to the success of young people (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Additionally, adults with higher education levels "live healthier and longer lives compared with their less educated peers" (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Numerous studies have observed the positive correlation between objective measures of health and a high educational level, with a possible

link being that higher educational attainment confers better access to jobs, allowing for a higher income and greater accumulation of familial wealth, which in turn leads to increased access to healthcare (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). The quantity and quality of an individual's social relations are correlated with education level (Fernández-Carro & Gumà Lao, 2022). A sense of loneliness is "prevalent among older adults with a low level of education," while those with higher levels of education "are at a lower risk of feeling late-life loneliness"(Fernández-Carro & Gumà Lao, 2022).

Given the existence of educational inequality and the importance of education to the path of an individual's life, an intervention is needed for struggling students, with an earlier intervention being ideal since it would minimize the amount of time that the students struggle educationally. This intervention should foster a portrait of education that will prepare the students most strongly for success. Being successful in the 21st century economy entails more than academic skills and a robust intellect (Whitehall et al., 2016). Employers highly value soft skills, including "communication, decision making/problem solving, self-management, and leadership," in their employees (Whitehall et al., 2016). Social-emotional skills, including "adaptive coping, emotional intelligence, social integration, problem solving, and a sense of personal well-being" are also highly valuable to the individual as these features are correlated with good mental health and excellent scholastic achievement (Whitehall et al., 2016). Similarly, an individual's self-confidence has been found to be extremely important in their success and a potent predictor for grade point average (Whitehall et al., 2016). With this in mind, we believe that the goal of education is not only the accruing of academic knowledge, but also the progressing along a journey of personal development.

Our opinions have also been influenced by success of the Texas Tech University (TTU) Honors College's Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program in Lubbock, Texas, a program in which one author was a mentor. In this program, selected students and faculty from the TTU Honors College are paired with and mentor a student at Bayless Elementary (Monacelli, 2019). Over one hundred TTU Honors College students participate as mentors in this program, setting aside time to tutor their mentee at least once a week during lunch time or the mentee's physical education period (Monacelli, 2019). The program's philosophy is that mentoring engenders role modeling, academics, and the encouragement of pursuing higher education (Monacelli, 2019). Often, over the course of a mentor's undergraduate career and tenure in the program, the mentor works with the same mentee (Monacelli, 2019). The weekly meetings over the course of semesters provides consistency and something for the mentee to look forward to as part of their weekly schedule (*Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program*, n.d.; Monacelli, 2019). The result of this steady relationship is not only that the mentee benefits greatly, but the college student mentors are also impacted themselves, with many describing their relationship with their mentees as akin to siblinghood (Monacelli, 2019). The healthy, enriching, mutualistic relationships that sprout from the program is evidenced by the high mentor retention rate and the fact that many children at Bayless Elementary ask for mentors (Monacelli, 2019).

The selection process for mentors in the program is meticulous. Students in the TTU Honors College who are in good standing—in regard to academics and conduct—are eligible to apply to be a mentor after they have finished their first semester at the Honors College (*Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program*, n.d.). Following their application, mentor candidates are interviewed by the director of the program and members of the board of the program (*Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program*, n.d.). Desirable characteristics of a mentor are holistic in scope: patience, enthusiasm, interest in the mentees, excellent communication skills,

excellent listening skills, the ability to self-evaluate, the desire to improve, experience in working with younger learners, the ability to connect with the mentees, and the knowledge of "how to handle sensitive issues that might require intervention" (*Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program*, n.d.).

This strong intentionality to recruit mentors that are holistically and emotionally intelligent provides a substrate that is conducive to the formation of a deep bond between the mentor and mentee, a relationship that has a profound effect on both members. Claire Crawford, a former board member of the program, said, "I want (people) to know how rewarding it is to have a relationship with a student that not only needs them but likes them" (Monacelli, 2019). Max Rowley, another former board member, echoed this when he stated, "In my experience, once the mentees get to know you and begin to start talking openly, it is very important to actively listen so the mentor can connect with the mentee. I feel this is important to have because it allows a friendship to be formed between the mentee and mentor" (*Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program*, n.d.).

The success of the Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program points to the high potential benefit of similar programs. Across the United States, there is a need for similar programs. Efficient setup and execution of such future programs warrants a simple, easy to understand model that can provide a basic skeleton for the philosophy and fundamental structure of such programs, a foundation that is applicable and adaptable to a wide range of communities across the country.

We assert that it is most helpful to frame this model as an intervention. Since a sociological intervention concerns a particular situation, viewing this model as an intervention compels one to thoroughly think through, discern, clarify, and define the relevant elements because they form the basis of social interaction in the relevant situation (Straus, 1989). Like many other sociological interventions, this model will combine multiple foci (Straus, 1989). For example, there is the mentor, the organization to which the mentor belongs, the mentee, and the organization to which the mentee belongs. Different levels of foci are often relevant, and sociological interventions should incorporate both the micro and macro views (Straus, 1989). For example, the model must encapsulate both the effect on each individual student and the collective effect on the school as a community.

To increase the positive effects and success of an intervention, the intervention should be based on theory and research, with theory and basic research giving rise to the design of the intervention which in turn produces the results of the intervention (Pillemer et al., 2003). Feedback mechanisms should exist within the apparatus so that findings from the intervention can help restructure the program design and potentially lead to modifications in the underlying theory (Pillemer et al., 2003). A model that is not based on theory or research or a model that is not evolving in the direction of improvement via feedback mechanisms can be ineffective and potentially dangerous for the participants. This poses a potential challenge to creating a model for a tutoring relationship between college students and elementary students because even successfully college students are not trained in the practical and research techniques necessary to run a self-sustaining program that is integrating theory and research. This situation is also difficult because the development of children can potentially involve sporadic, unsystematic, and emergent links between actions and consequences (Moore et al., 2019). More so, it is difficult to separate the effects of the intervention from the effects of the broader community system (Moore et al., 2019). This makes it difficult to have complex feedback mechanisms within the apparatus of the model. Given the potential pitfalls and

difficulty of this situation, we believe that any model for a program in which college students are paired in a mentoring relationship with struggling elementary students should prioritize simplicity so that the potential downside of a more complex intervention is avoided. Rather than this simplicity and minimalism in the model being a source of discouragement, it is a keystone that could increase the potential of the model if chosen correctly. This foundational keystone in our simplistic model is the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Although there is no elaborate feedback mechanism here, a model based on this relationship is inherently fluid and adaptable because people, such as the mentor and mentee, are active agents that are constantly reacting and responding to one another. This close-to-the-action adaptation and the limits of an individual relationship can potentially help the model avoid any dangers that a model possessing a large, multi-level apparatus might unintentionally pose. Additionally, this foundation of relationship between the mentor and mentee is congruent with the philosophy the model seeks to uphold—the understanding that not only is education is far more than academic, but also that the academic aspect of education is enhanced by the non-academic aspects of education.

With this understanding of the foundational importance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee, we propose the intervention of partnering younger, struggling students in impoverished communities with excelling college students in mentoring relationships that entail both one-on-one academic tutoring and companionship. Summarizing the steps of this intervention, we propose the IPBMO model: "I" for Identify, "P" for partner, "B" for Befriend, "M" for Mentor, and "O" for Observe. In the Identify stage, vulnerable students struggling academically or socially should be noted. In the Partner stage, the identified individuals should be partnered with an excelling college student of compatible temperament and personality. In the Befriend stage, the college student and the younger student form a bond that facilitates and cultivates trust between the two individuals. In the Mentor stage, the college student tutors and mentors the younger student, all while continuing the development of their friendship. In the Observe stage, changes in the mentee's outcomes should be noted to indicate the potential efficacy of the intervention.

Identify

The purpose of the first stage of the IPBMO model is identify students who are struggling academically or socially. The key observers who can identify such students in this stage are the classroom teachers. The teachers will have a much closer view and understanding of the students under their care than will the leadership or members of the mentoring program. The teachers should take note of students who they believe to be vulnerable to school disruption, which consists of interruptions in their relationships in school, the classroom environment, and the learning conditions (Sun et al., 2021). Identifying students vulnerable to school disruption is important as such disruption can prevent children from gaining the social, civic, and academic skills that school fosters (Sun et al., 2021). To identify students who are struggling, the teacher can look at quantitative metrics, such as a student's grades over the course of the school year. The teacher should also look for absenteeism and disengagement in class. Disengaged students are more often in dysfunctional families than are their peers (Sun et al., 2021). The student's relationship with classmates can also give the teacher clues about their social vulnerability. Students with tumultuous family relationships tend to have relationships with classmates that are compromised, making it more likely that such students will participate in or be victimized by bullying (Sun et al., 2021). Bullying often worsens the situation of the student, leading to inadequate socio-emotional adjustment, increased rates of substance abuse, guilt, worry, withdrawal from social interactions, disobedience, and

academic underachievement (Sun et al., 2021). After observing students who are at vulnerable to school disruption and are struggling academically or socially, the teacher should take note of these individuals in preparation for the next stage of the model. If the students need attention from a licensed professional, the teacher should notify the relevant parties, especially before proceeding to the next stage of the model.

Partner

The purpose of the second stage of the IPBMO model is to partner struggling younger students with high-achieving university students. The students identified in the previous stage as struggling and their parents should be contacted and asked whether they would be interested in being a mentee in the mentoring program. It is important that the teacher be the one to reach out to the students and their families, not the mentors or the leadership of the mentoring program, as the teacher already has an established relation to the student. A challenge that arises at this step is that if the student comes from an unstable household or has a negative relationship with the teacher, it will be difficult for the teacher to connect with the student and their families and encourage them to join the program. Often, students who have low participation and a poor attitude towards school—students that the teacher would be interested in helping—have a teacher-student relationship that is low in quality (Jederlund & von Rosen, 2022). Consequently, the students most in need of help might be less receptive to the teacher's advice. If the student and their families are interested in the program, the teacher can contact the leadership of the mentoring program and convey to them what are the needs and struggles of the student. Another obstacle presents at this step because if the teacher lacks an adequate understanding of the student, the teacher may be unsuccessful in correctly conveying the needs and struggles of the student to the leadership of the mentoring program. Based on the teacher's description of the student, the leadership of the program can select a potential mentor that will be partnered with the student. The leadership should select a potential mentor that has a high likelihood of forming a bond with the student. In situations where there is limited information on other persons, individuals may use the extent to which they feel themselves to be similar to another when making trust-based decisions—similarity between two persons often increases the likelihood of trust forming (Clerke & Heerey, 2021). Consequently, the leadership should choose a mentor who shares similarities to the mentee to accelerate the process of trust formation. It is possible that this correlation between similarities and trust exists because having similarities with another person helps one to process the other's communication and trust the other more easily—the other's beliefs feel more accessible if they are similar to one's own (Clerke & Heerey, 2021). One's own attitudes can help one predict an interpret another's the attitudes and behaviors of others who are similar (Clerke & Heerey, 2021). Accordingly, when partnering a mentee with a mentor, the leadership of the program should consider the individual's gender, background, and challenges so that they can pair them with a mentor who is similar, taking an accelerated path towards trust. A challenge that arises here is that the leadership's ability to partner a mentee with a similar mentor could be hindered if the teacher's own understanding and description of the mentee is incomplete or if the leadership's understanding—of the potential mentor or of the teacher's description of the mentee—is inadequate or flawed.

Befriend

The purpose of the third stage of the IPBMO model is for the mentor and mentee to form a bond that increases the trust between them. As the mentor and mentee meet at least once a week for one-on-one tutoring, it is expected that both individuals will converse and find

similarities or topics they can bond over. This stage is complete once the mentor and mentee consider each other friends. Also, it should be noted that even though the high-achieving college student is already being referred to as a mentor and the younger student is being referred to as a mentee, neither is embodying that role yet. Part of the philosophy of the IPBMO model is that the foundation of the model is the relationship between the two individuals, and the two individuals cannot fully become mentor and mentee until they are friends.

Mentor

The exact definition of a mentor varies from person to person, but most scholars agree that a mentor is an older individual who supplies career and personal advice to a less experienced person who is often younger (Haggard et al., 2011). The general understanding suggest that mentoring has both an instrumental aspect to it as well as a psychosocial dimension (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Mentoring that effectively embodies this duality leads not just to significant learning but also can have the effect of social transformation (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). The IPBMO model relies on this conception of mentoring—entailing both academic learning and personal development—and this reliance comes to the forefront in the fourth stage of the model. In the Mentor stage, the college student provides not just academic tutoring to the student, but also advises the younger student on school, all while continuing the friendship. The IPBMO model states that the Mentor stage must come after the Befriend stage because for the potential mentor to live up to the psychosocial dimension of mentoring, the older and younger student must first become friends and have a significant amount of trust. The younger student must understand that the older college student genuinely cares for them before the older college student can truly become a mentor. The IPBMO model encourages mentors to actively try to stimulate certain behaviors in their mentees in ways that simultaneously make the mentee feel cared for. For example, a former board member of the Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program gifted her mentee four presents for the mentee's birthday and told her mentee to share one of the presents with another mentee in the program (Monacelli, 2019). This example shows a mentor encouraging the behavior of sharing in a mentee while also making the mentee feel cared for and special. The potential behavioral mimicry—inadvertent mimicry of another individual's nonverbal conduct—that may result could lead to an increased connection between the mentee and the mentor (Clerke & Heerey, 2021). Once in the Mentor stage, the mentor should set goals and milestones that the mentee can reasonably achieve. The goals need not be highly specific or extensive; the goal may simply be improvement over prior performance. The goals set should be communicated to the mentee's teacher and will be used to gauge the mentee's progress in the next stage of the model.

Observe

In the observe stage, the mentor and mentee are still continuing their relationship—a relationship which has both academic and developmental purposes—but now the mentor is actively observing the mentee's progress. The progress can be gauged based on the goals set in the previous stage of the model. Of paramount performance in this stage is the communication between the mentee's teacher and the mentor. The teacher should be gauging the student's academic and social condition before communicating the mentee's progress, regress, or stagnation in the classroom to the mentor. Based on the mentee's trajectory, the teacher and mentor can decide on things to try, change, or continue. Additionally, the teacher should be sure to ask the mentee and his or her family if they want to continue in the

program, have any feedback regarding the mentor, or desire to change anything. The teacher should provide this input from the mentee and his or her family to the leadership board of the mentoring program. If the mentee continues with the program, the model should be continued at the Mentor and Observe Stages.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing inequalities, with the effects of the pandemic being borne more heavily by individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Darmody et al., 2021). Even before the pandemic, educational inequalities existed, and a student's socioeconomic background was a notable predictor of their scholastic success, with these gaps along socioeconomic lines emerging early in a child's academic career (Darmody et al., 2021). Learning loss due to the closing of schools during the pandemic was observed as being greater for students from lower socioeconomic status because their families were less able to provide support due to the wave of economic uncertainty and the because of the toll of working from home (Engzell et al., 2021; Haelermans et al., 2022). This increase in the education disparities is alarming because of the significant role that education plays in the course of one's life. Education represents the main path for an individual to attain "financial security, stable employment, and social success" (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Given the foundational role that education plays in an individual's life course, an intervention is needed for students who are struggling in school.

This intervention is not just for students struggling academically but also for students who may be struggling socially. Employers in the 21st century place emphasis not just on intellect but also on social-emotional skills (Whitehall et al., 2016). Drawing on inspiration from the TTU Honors College's Bayless Elementary Mentoring Program in Lubbock, Texas, a program in which one author was a mentor, we propose the intervention of pairing struggling students in vulnerable communities with high-achieving college students in mentor-mentee relationships that involve one-on-one academic tutoring as well as companionship. The core of this intervention is the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and the philosophy that effective mentoring can lead not just to increased academic performance but also social development and transformation with the likelihood of this transformation increasing if the relationship between the mentor and mentee is one of friendship and trust.

The stages of the intervention are captured by the IPBMO model: "I" for Identify, "P" for partner, "B" for Befriend, "M" for Mentor, and "O" for Observe. In the Identify stage, the teacher takes note of students that are struggling academically or socially and who could potentially benefit from participation as a mentee in the mentoring program. In the Partner stage, if the student and his or her family are interested in participating in the program, the struggling student can be paired with a high-achieving university student. If possible, the leadership of the mentoring program should select a potential mentor who shares some similarities with the struggling student to accelerate the relationship's path to trust. In the Befriend stage, the mentor and mentee form a close bond as friends. In the Mentor stage, the mentor continues to provide weekly academic tutoring and companionship to the mentee while also offering the mentee advice and trying to encourage positive behaviors in the mentee. In the Observe stage, the mentee's progress is gauged by the teacher against goals set in by the mentor in the Mentor stage. Based on the mentee's progress and feedback, the teacher and mentor can decide the next steps for the student.

The IPBMO model is a minimalistic model for the intervention and provides a skeleton that can be adapted to different environments. Further experimentation is needed not just to improve this skeleton, but also to determine the optimal ways to customize it to a particular situation. We believe that, with this experimentation and optimization, the IPBMO model can be implemented across a wide range of communities to help decrease modifiable disparities in education. To accelerate this process of experimentation and optimization, we encourage programs that are working on this intervention to communicate with other similar programs to share improvements and insights.

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