

The Perceived Impact of Educational Management Organization Mentors Among Former High School Dropouts Who Subsequently Graduated High School

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Abstract: *The high school dropout problem has been the focus of educational leaders and researchers for several decades. Despite efforts, students continue to drop out of high school. In an effort to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of school, educators have paired mentors with youth in hopes of increasing graduation rates. These efforts have produced mixed results at best. Given such, Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) have surfaced in recent years to provide educational support to help students who once dropped out to graduate high school. A major component of EMOs is pairing employed mentors with students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an understanding of how mentors employed by EMOs helped former high school dropouts graduate high school. Using survey sampling, 34 participants responded to open-ended questions regarding their experiences with their mentors. The sample included 27 females and 7 males ages 18-24 of Hispanic and Caucasian ethnic backgrounds. The open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The resulting themes were (a) communication, (b) encouragement, (c) motivation, (d) understanding, and (e) caring. Findings from this study may help inform educators how to improve communications with youth at risk for dropping out of school.*

To say that educational, business, and political leaders have focused efforts toward research on high school dropouts would be an understatement, given the profusion of historical and current research available (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Mensch & Kandel, 1998; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Valkov, 2018; Valerand, Portier, & Guay, 1997). Indeed, educational leaders have established the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES; 2004); business leaders have developed numerous local, regional, and national initiatives and policies; and political leaders developed the landmark macroinitiative No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Markowitz, 2018). All of these have been aimed at promoting, conducting, and disseminating research on high school dropouts (Doll et al., 2013; Hussar & Bailey, 2013, 2017; Markowitz, 2018; NCES, 2004; NCLB, 2002; Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016).

Researchers have continued to acknowledge the “usual suspects” regarding high school dropouts (Kim, Joo, & Lee, 2018; Valkov, 2018). That is, dropouts tend to have experienced sociological factors such as criminogenic neighborhoods and low socioeconomic status (Archambault, Janosz, Dupere, Brault, & Mc Andrew, 2017; Barth, Cebula, & Shen, 2016), familial factors such as parenting styles and parental involvement (Balli, 1996; Fan & Williams, 2010; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005), and educational factors such as the quality of schools and teachers (Doll et al., 2013) that render them more likely to drop out of high school (Barth et al., 2016; Doll et al., 2013). As a result, educational, business, and political leaders have established a myriad of initiatives, strategies, interventions, and policies aimed at reducing school dropout rates and improving graduation rates (Agnus & Hughes, 2017; Heers, Van Klaveren, Groot, & Van den Brink, 2014; Iachini, Rogelberg, Terry, & Lutz, 2016; Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2017).

Despite the many initiatives, strategies, interventions, and policies established by stakeholders in education, business, and politics, the well-documented high school dropout problem in the United States persists (Doll et al., 2013; Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 2000). As noted by Hickman and Heinrich (2011), perhaps this inability to reduce the high school dropout rate is based on our current level of understanding of high school dropouts. Hickman and Heinrich further note that waiting until high school to establish initiatives, interventions, strategies, and policies may be too late, as some future high school dropouts come to kindergarten already academically behind those students who eventually will graduate. Moreover, dropouts continue down this developmental pathway throughout their K-12 trajectory; they continue to fall further behind academically than those students who eventually graduate (Oreopoulos et al., 2017; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Trembaly, 2005).

The impact of dropping out of high school has been well documented in terms of the impact on the U.S. national debt and unemployment rates (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Carlson, 2014). Researchers have also noted that high school dropouts impact their state economies, as many business leaders are unwilling to create companies in and/or move companies to states that have a negative educational reputation (Amos, 2008). As noted by Amos (2008), high dropout rates and low graduation rates are primary factors in determining a state’s educational reputation, especially if business owners have children. Finally, researchers have noted the personal impact of dropping out of school, such as high divorce rates (NCES, 1996), unemployment and low-end jobs (Carlson, 2014), lower lifetime income (Alexander et al., 1997), low self-esteem and self-efficacy (Mensch & Kandel, 1998), and higher suicidal ideation (Fergusson, McLeod, & Horwood, 2015; Kosidou et al., 2014), to name a few.

Given that efforts to curtail the rate of high school dropout continue, business and educational leaders have now combined resources to understand and address this historical and current problem. One solution generated by this business-education partnership has been the creation of educational management organizations (EMOs; Bulkley, 2005; Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010; Miron, Urschel, Yat Aguilar, & Dailey, 2012). EMOs are organizations that manage the educational platform, curricula, teachers, mentors, and operations within a school or across several schools and, in return, receive funding from the school. This funding is often derived from the partner schools' state funding (Ertas & Roch, 2014; Miron et al., 2010; Molnar, Miron, & Urschel, 2009). EMOs can be structured as both nonprofit and for-profit; most frequently, they tend to be for-profit organizations owned by business-minded stakeholders who then hire employees with professional experience in the education field (Bulkley, 2002). The rationale behind the EMO model is that teachers, mentors, researchers, and other employees are incentivized to produce measurable change, as they are paid employees of a private business versus a state-funded school or department of education. Typically, these EMOs are able to offer higher salaries, procure higher job satisfaction, lower turnover, and decrease perceived bureaucracy. Conversely, employees of state-funded schools report lower salaries, lower job satisfaction, higher turnover rates, and more bureaucracy (Bulkley, 2002; Ertas & Roch, 2014; Molnar et al., 2009).

Although there are many interventions employed by educators to address the high school dropout problem (too many to name for the scope of this study), one of the more commonly used initiatives in public state-funded, private, and EMO schools is the use of education mentors (Agnus & Hughes, 2017; Black & Daly, 2015; Miron et al., 2010). The mentors' main activities include working one-on-one with at-risk students (mentees) to provide a personal connection through which they assist students with their academic, sociological, and familial problems (Black & Daly, 2015; Sutherland & Snyder, 2007). Researchers have documented the significant impact mentors have on various educational outcomes (Ashwin, 2005; Cosgrove, 2011; Elton, 2001). However, such outcomes have come under scrutiny based on evaluative methods and the fact that youth are still dropping out of school at alarming rates (Barth et al., 2016; Jepsen, Mueser, & Troske, 2017; Jimerson et al., 2000).

Although the aforementioned research illuminates important findings regarding high school dropouts, we have found no research that has examined the perceived impact of EMO-employed mentors among former high school dropouts who graduated. Given such, further research is warranted to explore these graduates'/mentees' perceived impact of their mentors on their successful high school graduation process.

The purpose of this qualitative, single-case study is to understand the perceived impact of EMO-employed mentors on former high school dropouts who graduated

from high school. More specifically, the aim of this study is to understand what aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship former dropouts who are now graduates found helpful. The research question to be addressed in this study is, what is the perceived impact of mentors employed by educational management organizations in helping former high school dropouts to graduate high school?

Method

A qualitative, single-case study design was used to understand the perceived impact that mentors, who are employed by educational management organizations, have on helping former high school dropouts graduate high school. More specifically, the aim of this study was to understand what elements of these mentor-mentee relationships helped students who once dropped out of high school re-enroll and, subsequently, graduate from high school. The research question postulated was, what is the perceived impact of mentors employed by educational management organizations in helping former high school dropouts to graduate high school?

As an EMO, Grad Solutions solicits high school dropouts to enroll in their program. Upon enrollment, Grad Solutions places the student in a partnering high school and provides educational management to both the student and partnering school by providing the online educational platform, curriculum, teachers, texts, resources, and a mentor. Mentors are full-time employees of Grad Solutions who have earned a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education, business, or various social sciences who work one-on-one with students to help them obtain their high school diplomas. Although mentors serve a variety of roles (i.e., big brother/sister, teacher, tutor, life coach, friend), the perceived role such mentors have in helping these former high school dropouts to graduate high school, from the students' perspective, is unknown.

To address the research question, all 460 graduates from the graduating classes of 2017 and 2018 from Grad Solutions, an EMO located in Mesa, Arizona, were solicited, asked to sign a consent form, and asked to complete a qualitative open-ended survey via SurveyMonkey to share their perspectives on the experiences they had with their mentors during their enrollment with Grad Solutions. The link to the open-ended survey was emailed to all 460 graduates. Reminder emails with the link to the survey were sent once a week for four weeks after the initial email. Confidentiality was maintained during the study through blind copying email addresses so potential participants were unable to view other email addresses. Responses via SurveyMonkey required no unique identifiers other than gender, age, and ethnicity, thus maintaining partial anonymity of responses. Survey responses were printed out per participant and read repeatedly to identify keywords and phrases. Using thematic analysis, significant keywords and themes were noted and compared once all responses were reviewed. Saturation was rapidly achieved, as

graduates' responses consistently reflected similar themes. See Appendix for a complete list of open-ended survey questions.

Results

A qualitative, single-case study design was used to understand the perceived impact mentors, who are employed by for-profit educational management organizations, have on helping former high school dropouts graduate from high school. The research question postulated was, what is the perceived impact of mentors employed by educational management organizations in helping former high school dropouts to graduate high school?

Of the 460 graduates solicited, 24 emails bounced back as nondeliverable. Of the 436 emails that did not bounce back, 50 graduates responded. Of the 50 who responded, five did not sign the consent form and 11 signed the consent form but did not attempt the survey. Hence, our data sample was 34 graduate mentees. Because it was not possible to determine the number of graduates who actually received the solicitation emails (i.e., rarely used email addresses, etc.), an accurate response rate cannot be determined. The graduate mentees who did respond were between the ages of 18-24, primarily female, and of Caucasian and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. See Table 1 below for complete summary.

Table 1

Demographic Variables

| Variable | n | Percent |
|-----------------|----|---------|
| Age | | |
| 18-24 | 34 | 100.00 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 7 | 20.59 |
| Female | 27 | 79.41 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic/Latino | 17 | 50.00 |
| White | 17 | 50.00 |

Based on responses from the participants, five themes emerged via participants' consistent use of specific keywords and phrases when sharing their mentee experiences. The five themes identified were communication, encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring.

Communication

The most common theme discussed by participants when describing their experiences with their mentors was communication. Mentees noted that their mentors communicated on a regular basis via several modalities, including texting, phone calls, Skype, and regularly scheduled synchronous meetings. Following are examples of mentees' responses.

I can't stress the down-to-earth communication enough and checking on my actual well-being.

If he was going to be out of town, he would give us his number and email and he didn't just leave like nothing and when he got back, he would respond right away.

If I wouldn't log in after 2 or 3 days, I would get a call from her and she would give me reasons why she really wanted me to continue and succeed. She always communicated with me and always made sure I was doing okay on my lessons.

...constantly called me to make sure I was doing well...

While communication frequency and modality emerged as a central theme in nearly all responses, it was not just the sheer frequency of communication that was singularly important to mentees. Rather, the mentees noted that the content and nature of the communication of encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring were germane experiences in assisting them to graduate high school.

Encouragement

A clear and consistent keyword that emerged was encouragement. Mentees noted that mentors provided positive communications, including encouraging them not to give up, that they can and will succeed, that others have completed degrees, and that mentors believed their mentees would graduate.

My mentor went pretty far to help me finish my diploma. There was a time where he actually stayed up till 2 in the morning with me when I was struggling and feeling frustrated with a test I took because I kept failing was beginning to break down and cry.

He texted me encouraging words, and even told me a story about himself to distract the sadness.

I wouldn't have done it without her. I needed the encouragement to finish. I believed I wasn't capable of graduating because I had already tried twice in the past and failed.

She walked me through every moment where I felt like I couldn't keep going and gave me confidence to continue my education in college.

Understood my trouble talking on the phone and reached in other ways. Encouraged me and also constantly made me feel like I was doing everything right and always rooted for me.

Didn't let me give up. Gave me numerous amounts of advice and always encouraged me to doing more!

95% was all my mentor giving me my goals, staying positive, congratulating me on my accomplishments and pushing me forward!

Motivation

Mentees noted that mentors were positive role models who helped them see the vision and plan for success, made them feel they could succeed by staying positive with them, pushed them to graduate, and had faith in their success by celebrating short-term goals and providing a vision and belief in long-term goals.

My mentor pushed me and told me I could do it and he was the most amazing person I could ever ask for.

She motivated me to keep going and not give up on my work.

If I wouldn't log in after 2 or 3 days I would get a call from her and she would give me reasons why she really wanted me to continue and succeed.

She was like 80 percent of my finishing my diploma because I was being lazy and didn't really want to do any work, but she still had hope for me and would call me to get to my work and remind me of my goal and encourage me.

Constantly called me to make sure I was doing well and would give me pep talks when I felt like giving up.

She pushed me to be the best me I could be.

Understanding

Mentees noted that mentors seemed to understand their situation and the difficulties in balancing life, work, family, and school. Mentors seemed to understand that such difficulties were normal and part of the process of completing high school.

My mentor talked to me as if we've known each other forever. So she really made me feel comfortable with her and it helped me open up a lot more when it came to my problems at school.

Helped me understand the course and choices I had.
Helped me understand all the time how close I am to graduation.

She pushed me, supported me and listened to what was going on in my life. Little text messages from her telling me she was keeping an eye out for me did wonders.

My mentor is the reason I graduated, very positive, very supportive.
Was never judgmental, never too hard, and very understanding.

Caring

Mentees noted that mentors appeared to genuinely care about their success; it was obvious to them that the mentors cared whether their mentees graduated. Participants shared that mentors appeared to go out of their way to communicate and to remain positive, sympathetic, and encouraging at all times. It was apparent that mentees were not just numbers to mentors, but people for whom they cared.

I can't stress the down-to-earth communication enough and checking on my actual well-being rather than just why haven't you done work.

Well he helped me find a college just recently and he would always make sure I had everything I needed to graduate or finish a certain class.

My mentor asked if I needed any help or what I didn't understand. They always checked up on me.

He actually cared about me graduating and always kept me in check when I would almost not make the deadline or when I needed extra help.

My mentor genuinely cared about my progress. It's actually great to know you have someone who actually cares if you succeed.

Kept me accountable, constantly reminded me of what I had to do and that really showed me that she cared and taught me to be more conscious of my task that I have to complete.

Discussion

Our purpose of this study was to understand the perceived impact that mentors, employed by EMOs, had on students who had once dropped out of high school graduating high school. In other words, from students' perspectives, how did their mentors help them overcome having dropped out of high school and, subsequently, graduate when they were unable to graduate before enrollment in Grad Solutions? As we discovered, the themes of communication, encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring were instrumental in helping students overcome dropping out of high school and subsequently graduating.

Although these five themes were clearly common in the participants' responses, caution should be utilized as there are several limitations with qualitative case study research. First, the results are not generalizable to the larger population of high school dropouts. However, our goal was not to generalize to the population of dropouts, but to understand students' perspectives of how mentors hired by EMOs were fundamental in helping former dropouts graduate high school. Second, we used open-ended survey questions versus student interviews. Interviewing the students would have allowed us to gain a richer and deeper understanding and explanation as to how these identified themes operated in helping them

graduate. Finally, but not exhaustive, many of the students' responses contained elements of multiple themes. Not gaining further explanation as to what they meant could have influenced our interpretation of what responses best fit with a particular theme.

Despite such limitations, the findings of our study are encouraging in helping our educational system understand and help at-risk youth in graduating high school. High schools, charter schools, dropout recovery schools, and EMOs have spent numerous hours designing, implementing, and evaluating programs to help at-risk youth graduate school. Such schools often integrate counselors, peer mentors, and volunteer mentors to help at-risk students graduate, often without success or with mixed results at best.

Perhaps the findings of our study may provide a blueprint for educating students at risk for dropping out of high school. More specifically, our study demonstrates the importance of the type of communication needed and, more important, desired by at-risk high school students/former dropouts. However, it was not just the quantity or mechanisms of mentor communication that graduates found relevant to their educational success. It was also how and what these mentors communicated to students. More specifically, it was the constant communication through which mentors provided encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring that was instrumental in reaching students who once dropped out of high school and in getting them to graduate.

Although communication, encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring were separate themes or mechanisms by which mentors were successful in assisting at-risk youth to graduate high school, these themes actually were embedded and woven collectively into their responses. That is, students noted not just one or two themes at times, but all five of these themes were often embedded in explaining how mentors helped them graduate. For example, one mentee noted,

I liked how he communicated and he sent me an inspirational [encouragement] video every week or so because it showed me he cared about me as a person not just a student, he understands we could get discouraged so he sent things to keep us motivated.

This typical response highlights how these common themes might operate together versus operating in a separate and isolated manner.

Perhaps educators and EMOs could build on these common themes and create mentoring programs tailored toward communicating such themes to students who have dropped out and/or are at risk for dropping out of school. In addition, educators and EMOs may want to look for such characteristics from teachers and mentors during the hiring and onboarding process for those charged to educate at-risk youth. Moreover, educators might consider workshops and teacher and/or mentor training grounded in the embeddedness of communicating encouragement, motivation, understanding, and caring. Finally, research

that further examines characteristics (i.e., background of mentors, length of employment, mentor success rate of student progress, etc.) of mentors that predict educational progress and graduation could identify mentors who possess the ability to communicate, encourage, motivate, understand, and care for at-risk youth and who inspire such youth who once dropped out of school to graduate.

Conclusion

Why were the mentors employed by Grad Solutions successful in getting students who once dropped out of high school across the graduation finish line? Perhaps the answer to this question is grounded in the blueprint of EMOs, such as Grad Solutions. More specifically, the mentors are employees who are carefully screened and selected through the hiring and onboarding process. As an employee, mentors are incentivized monetarily to perform and meet company objectives, namely getting students to graduate. Indeed, many other educational entities rely on peer mentors and volunteers to work with at-risk students. Although such efforts can be viewed as altruistic, there are no incentives for volunteers to perform to meet the objective of getting students to graduate. Also, mentors from Grad Solutions have the educational training, experience, and background to educate and work with at-risk youth, a very important element of Grad Solutions that puts mentors in a position to benefit student educational success and graduate.

Finally, Grad Solutions mentors carry a student/mentee caseload of 80-125 students, which is much lower than the caseload of school counselors who are charged with assisting students to graduate. For example, school counselors in Arizona, where Grad Solutions is located, have an average caseload of 903 students (American School Counselor Association, 2016), impeding these counselors' ability to provide individual attention to those at risk for dropping out of high school. EMOs, such as Grad Solutions, appear to be a successful and viable option that states should consider in educating students at risk for dropping out of high school as well as former dropouts who returned to complete their degrees.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

The following questions and prompts will be used to guide the focus group conversations:

1. Icebreaker discussion: Let's start by talking a little bit about how you became involved with Grad Solutions and what the experience was like for you. How has earning your diplomas helped you? What are you guys doing now?
2. What types of help or resources were you able to get through Grad Solutions that helped you successfully earn your diploma?
3. Let's talk about the role of the mentors as part of the Grad Solutions process. What was it like to work with a mentor?
4. What was your understanding of how the mentor process was supposed to work?
5. Most of you would have had an initial mentor for the first couple of months, and then switched to a longer-term mentor. What did you understand about the purpose of that process?
6. What were some of the things you liked best about working with a mentor? Liked least?
7. To what extent do you think your mentor helped you to finish your diploma? What specific things did s/he do that you found valuable?
8. What types of things did your mentor do that were maybe not as helpful in the process?
9. Was there anything that you wish that your mentor had done that did not happen? If so, what types of things would you have liked to have experienced?
10. If you were going to help select Grad Solutions mentors whose main role would be to help students successfully earn their diplomas, what characteristics would you look for in those people? What do you think they would specifically need to do to help students most effectively?
11. What else would you like to say about your experiences working with Grad Solutions and with the mentors specifically?

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