Igniting Hope in Youth from High-Risk Settings

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Educators often find themselves in a struggle for survival and are unable to resolve their differences with challenging youth, who are given labels due to behaviors of acting out that they may display. This research explores a mentoring program that uses an alternative to traditional behavioral models in working with youth and that provides evidence-based insights into creating a community of acceptance and hope. This unique approach to mentoring embraces identity and integrity as a way of inspiring hope in youth from high-risk settings and forming intimate connections.

Keywords: mentoring, transformation, high-risk youth, SPARK, sacred

INTRODUCTION

Far too many youths labeled high-risk are not faring well in life as well as in schools. To accompany this problem most educators lack the ability to effectively respond to these youths. For decades, these high-risk youth and educators have been struggling to resolve their differences both in and out of classrooms. A challenge for even veteran teachers and administrators is how to respond to students whose classroom behavior they find disruptive, disrespectful, irritating, annoying, and a serious threat to classroom etiquette. Most educators find these discretely labeled students to be a threat upon their entering the classroom and arm themselves as best they can in a win/lose conflict of wills. With little imagination for resolving this disconnection with alternative forms of classroom management, teachers and administrators are at a loss to resolve the challenges that a defiant student may display in their schools. Reinforcements are quickly called in as the stakes escalate and become harsher as they follow more punitive approaches. As a result, most often these challenging students find themselves sent to the office, disciplined through in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS), placed in alternative schools, put into lockdown facilities, or they drop out of school altogether. In interviews with juvenile judges, probation officers, school administrators and teachers, it is well-known that these conventional methods prove ineffective when confronted with an obstinate or defiant student in their classroom.

Often plagued with problems not of their own making, youth known as being "high-risk" find themselves in classrooms where they are labeled as lazy, disruptive, or defiant and quickly erect walls to protect themselves from what is happening to them. These students too, lack the skills and resources to resolve or respond to both deforming environments outside of the school and expectations from their teachers.

Today, many educators and high-risk youth have pretty much given up on the idea that this deforming culture will ever change. They long for a sense of the possibility that education can offer something that is an antidote to the cynicism, self-indulgence, competition, and despair that is so much a part of today's

educational culture. There is a need for a re-visioning of how to reconnect these educators and students, and to ignite that mysterious spirit within each which is the source of inspiration, motivation, meaning, knowing, and forming intimate relationships.

Formal Mentoring Programs

As a response to these challenges, there has been a longstanding interest in mentoring programs to influence and change the behavior of children and youth; yet solid theoretical and empirical research addressing this important issue has only begun to emerge (Keller, 2010). The approaches to mentoring programs have predominantly centered on prevention-orientation programs that focused on factors that would reduce specific behavioral problems (Catalano et al., 2002).

Formal mentoring programs in the US have been in existence since the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were often situated within major social movements that addressed middle-class volunteers reaching out to impoverished families to provide support, moral uplift, and role modeling (Baker & Maguire, 2005; Freedman, 1993). The Big Brothers movement emerged in 1904, which linked business and civic leaders with youth who appeared to be destined for the reformatory (Beiswinger, 1985). These programs focused on the need to change the behavior of youth who had been brought to the attention of the authorities (Allen & Eby, 2010). Researchers were led to believe that mentoring relationships are more successful if they share the same gender, race and interests, thus mentoring programs matched the youth with mentors based on those factors for the purpose of changing the behavior of the youth (Meyer, 2010).

Beyond the scope of how the students are selected and matched with mentors we need to look at the focus of these traditional programs. Most traditional mentoring programs focus on goals pertaining to academic success, coaching the youth, and giving advice pertaining to life skills (Anderson, 2013). Programs are designed with goals based on a deficit model that youth are "broken" or "problems to be managed" and they will help the youth (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Goal attainment scaling is used to help mentees in programs work on self-improvement while strengthening the bond between mentor and mentee. Another factor that defines traditional mentoring programs is that of a "one-to-one" approach to matching. According to Anderson (2013), mentors and mentees are selected, matched, and then proceed to meet individually with each other.

Traditional mentoring programs involves the age of the mentees being served in collation with the reference that connected them with the mentoring program. As described by Louis B. Anderson, most mentoring programs serve youth ages nine through eleven who become involved in mentoring programs through the assistance of a parent or teachers (Anderson, 2013). Traditional mentoring programs work with youth that are struggling in school or at home, but they do not typically work with severe at-risk youth. In addition to serving youth that are not at-risk, traditional programs also take care to use mentors that meet certain criteria, such as selecting mentors that are typically older adults or gifted/advanced students, because youth facing significant risks are thought to be poor candidates for volunteer-based intervention (LaKind, 2014). The mentors typically have had broad experiences and knowledge to provide the relationship needed to be successful in these types of programs. Traditional programs may also require mentors to have a minimum grade point average. According to admission requirements, Eastern Washington University and Carroll College offer peer-mentoring programs that require exactly that. Mentors and mentees are held to certain expectations that must be met to even apply for the mentoring program in this traditional role.

Role of Behaviorism in Mentoring

Since the early 20th century, classroom management has become the standard teaching practice for the American classroom. Books on classroom management continue to be peddled that promote a behavioristic approach to managing students with compelling titles such as *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (Cowley, 2001) or *Bad Students, Not Bad Schools* (Weisberg, 2017), while others might be more subdued such as *Classroom Management that Works* (Marzano, 2003), *Developing a Learning Classroom* (Cooper

& Garner, 2012), and *Managing Classroom Behavior using Positive Behavioral Supports* (Scott et al., 2012).

Behaviorism, as seen in classroom management, is found where schoolteachers are supplied techniques and strategies with an emphasis on incentives and punishment as a way to "manage and control" students: it has created a culture where teachers are pitted against students in a never-ending struggle for power and autonomy. While most students comply and conform to the manipulation of well-intentioned teachers, this form of consequences and disciplinary approaches does not work with oppositional and defiant youth. Not that traditional classroom management techniques really work to produce intrinsically motivated, critical thinking, imaginative, and liberated outcomes in our students, but rather the contrary has been argued by many: the primary purpose of schooling is for the training of social efficiency and the production of conforming and reliant workers. With focus on social efficiency, it is easy to see why contemporary schools rely so heavily on scientific and pseudoscientific behaviorism.

This behavioristic approach actually works against forming meaningful, intimate relationships due to the fact that it requires educators to see their students as "Its" (i.e., objects) (Buber, 1958) that can be manipulated and controlled. It is not a method for building trust because it is predicated on using conditional responses to change the behaviors of students. While most conventional at-risk programs are designed to change the behavior of the youth through rewards, incentives, and punishment, they see short-term benefits at best and are of little benefit to at risk teens—to say nothing of the fact that they obviate intrinsic motivation.

The pervasive image of teachers today is that they are trained to be effective managers in their classrooms and successfully preparing students for a battery of high-stakes tests. This image of schooling today with its emphasis on pouring information into the minds of passive learners is so common that few credible voices have been well heard to challenge what has become routine and now is fast becoming policy. While concerned voices (Gardner, 1996; Miller, 2002; Palmer, 1993, 1998; Shapiro, 2006) have raised alarm over the direction education is going, for the most part, their concern and outrage (Purpel, 1999) are not taken seriously enough to alter our current direction that is to promote an increasing alienation of students and teachers from each other and to say nothing of learning that relates to personal meaning.

SPARK: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Our research offers a model that rejects the conventional behaviorist approach that most schools embrace as a way to manage and change the behavior of students. Our challenge has been and continues to be about how to respond to those students who repeatedly challenge teacher's authority in the classroom and seem to take delight in being disruptive. We can see what is driving current management policies and programs and why many youths are so resistant to changing their behaviors in spite of the consequences that are inevitable and unavoidable, but we also need a clearer understanding of the environments before providing an antidote to this crisis that are having a deleterious effect on many aspects of their lives and contributes to their negative behaviors.

Taking a simple but transformative practice of cultivating meaningful relationships, we assembled youth known as being high-risk into a collaborative program with university students in pre-service teacher program. The aspiring teachers gained direct experience and new insights on how to connect with troubled teenagers and to ignite or re-ignite a motivational "spark". Through collaboration with local Juvenile Courts, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the University of West Georgia's College of Education, alongside other local establishments, a mentoring program was created that demonstrates a radically alternative approach to working with both at-risk youth and aspiring teachers.

Background

Our journey began in 2009 when a discussion with a Juvenile Judge, who had just finished a rough day in court began lamenting about the seventy-six youth who came before him due to their lack of motivation, respect for others and themselves. Their "dead eyes" showed little hope that things were

going to change for the better. Reacting with alarm that there could be so many young people between the ages of 11 and 18 in trouble with the law that resulted in their having to stand before a judge to be disciplined, in my naiveté, asked him what happens to these kids—"what do you do to them?" From his response, it appeared that there was little working in favor of helping these youths improve their behavior or attitudes and offered them little effective incentives to stay in school and little hope that anything in their lives will change for the better. Reflecting on this conversation along with weekly visits to the jail, it was evident how early patterns were forming that were leading far too many young people into destructive and deforming practices.

School, for most of these youth, is seen as a place to endure until they turn 18. It is not a place where they feel welcomed and motivated by personal meaning. It is very evident that there is a need for an alternative to a school structure that has such modest aspirations for their students such as writing papers that more often reflect the teacher's belief than that of their students, busy homework, and performing well-standardized tests. Meeting with my class of pre-education majors we discussed starting a program designed to ignite a spark in those youth who showed little motivation or hope that anything in their lives could or would change for the better. Together, we quickly began developing a program and before we could do much planning, the Department of Juvenile Justice delivered seven youth between the ages of 11 and 18 to a classroom at the university. The youth were either court ordered, offered incentives, or just encouraged to participate in the program. From this simple beginning, we began to grow a program called SPARK, which was designed to form connections with the youth.

Praxis—SPARK Mentoring Program

The theoretical framework for this collaborative action research was drawn from the holistic/spiritual principles of Martin Buber's "I and Thou" (1958). In the context of Buber's work, the desire to manage, mold and manipulate falls away to a more compassionate and communal way of being and caring for each other. Linking pre-service teachers with high-risk youth became a way in which each group could connect to each other on a soulful level. Since its inception, the SPARK Mentoring Program has provided a non-judgmental and humanistic philosophy of working with youth ages 11-18, who have been identified as *high-risk* by the Department of Juvenile Justice. It provided an avenue for pre-service teachers to authentically relate to some very angry and challenging youth while also igniting in them a "spark."

This collaborative program is designed to provide youth who had found themselves in trouble with law enforcement an opportunity to move beyond their preconceived biases and experience reconciliation. About a dozen youth who are on probation are brought in weekly for two hours to the university where they meet with a group of around fifteen pre-service teachers. Joining these two groups of young people with all their preconceived biases toward each other, provides an opportunity to explore their inner lives and witness the influences that had shaped each of their lives. Programs are designed for students not only to learn how to communicate and connect with troubled youth, but also ignite a spark in the youth. A great benefit to our pre-service teachers is to know themselves better and learn how to relate and form meaningful relationships with youth who came from toxic, chaotic environments, are struggling with their studies or have dropped out of school.

SPARK Curriculum

Fundamental to SPARK, we have come to know these high-risk youths as individuals who are much more than the labels given to them. We come to know them as individuals beyond their diagnosable presenting issues or problems through the healing relationships we cultivate together. The first requisite that we address with our college student mentors is to not see the youth as a label (juvenile delinquent, defiant, troubled, lazy etc.…) but as sacred, awe and spirit. We ask them to shift their way of thinking about the youth to see them with respect—as sacred—having great value. This vital requisite sets the stage for what follows in the way the participants relate to each other and the programs. This can be a challenge for college students due to their preconceived images of seeing these youth as being a challenge for teachers and administrators. They are reminded frequently that we are not there to judge, criticize, compel, or coerce the teens to change their behaviors, but merely to provide a spark, an awakening of

their very souls, a sense of hope and possibility. They are to foster a meaningful trusting relationship that opens opportunities for dialogue, mentoring, tutoring, exploring, learning, and examining one's life. The aim is to build appropriate relationships of hope and trust while equipping them with a sense of purpose, while knowing that someone cares about them.

From his work with troubled youth, Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1966) created his person-centered approach to therapy. More importantly, Rogers' person-centered approach, or commonly referred to person-centered therapy, focuses on valuing the significance of an individual as more than the obvious problems or behaviors exhibited (Rogers, 1966). Similarly, to Rogers' work, the SPARK mentors are urged to see and treat each youth as sacred (Buber, 1958) and not focus on their behaviors.

Martin Buber's (1958) words "All real living is meeting" describes our philosophy of working, playing, and viewing other people as sacred individuals, and not simply seeing them through the lens of what they do or how they act. Traditionally, mentors are present to assist in modifying the youth's behavior in some way. Within the context of the SPARK program, the sacred implies esteeming, viewing, and treating the relationship with another person with reverent respect and care. As mentors and staff model the sentiment of everyone being sacred, it helps to create a culture of acceptance, trust, and openness. In addition, as mentors take the initiative and model this sacred perspective it supports youth in enacting the same behaviors towards self, peers, and mentors. Changes in the youths' attitude, appearance and behavior appear quickly, not due to any form of manipulation but from an inner desire to change. In his book on the *Power of Intention*, Wayne Dyer (2004) describes a non-manipulative approach merely by changing the way you look at something. Simply by changing how you perceive something, it changes. Thus, based on the way we see the youth; they respond to how we see them. They change not due to extrinsic incentives or pressure but from a desire to be real with themselves and the college students.

Whether in classrooms, around their peers, in the courtroom or in their homes, negative labels are attached to them primarily based on their behaviors, social status and appearance. These labels are so frequently used to describe the youth that, while they do not like the labels, they identify themselves through the labels ("I am bad, mean, troublemaker, failure and a loser"). When the mentors and staff see the youth as sacred, awe and spirit there awakens a spark that begins to shift their perception of themselves and the world around them.

Seeing the youth as sacred also means that we do not demean them or focus on/try to change their behaviors. We have found that their behaviors do change—not from any form of manipulation but when they began to see themselves differently. We are all amazed at the changes we see in their attitude, behaviors, and appearance when we do not focus on these elements.

When mentors view and interact with youth through a sacred perspective, it assists in promoting an accepting culture where youth gradually become open to the new relationships and program activities. This emerging practice of mutuality between all the participants aids in creating an environment where those involved can gradually learn to be more open and honest about their perspectives and life experiences.

Mentors are not encouraged to "fix" the youth or resolve their personal problems due to our lack of understanding and resources to address their personal issues. We find that when we just listen to them and show compassion, they leave in a better frame of mind to resolve some of the challenging issues they face daily including be bullied at school, depression, anger, neglect, abuse, or poor self-esteem to mention a few. When the youth find that they are not alone, that many of the college students have had and continue to have problems like theirs and even worse, they begin to become more trusting and open to forming a trusting relationship.

Seeing the youth as sacred also means that when the youth come to us with seemingly impenetrable walls—walls that were erected a long time ago, the college students are not to try in any way to get the youth to remove this wall, but allow the youth to be themselves—whatever that may entail. By not focusing on the wall, to everyone's surprise, the "impenetrable walls" soon vanish and the youth are sharing details about their lives.

Dissolving the Disconnect

From the outside, the SPARK program looks rather simple and unimpressive. We take teens that are living troubled lives and link them up with university students for 10 weeks. While there is a format or structure for the program, it is also emergent, flexible, and relying heavily on intuition—all the while it is continually being modified. As we enter the inner sanctums of relationships, we draw upon a construct that I designed many years ago that is commonly referred to as "the cosmos."

The cosmos exemplifies the meaning of getting personal. It is sharing and being heard at the meaningful level of our personal being. It promotes the forming of open, direct, sincere, deep, and meaningful relationships. The cosmos is an activity that each of my students must create and present on a weekly basis at each SPARK program. The cosmos is a visual representation and a narrative of the influences that have shaped and transformed their personal lives. This project requires one to reflect and examine past experiences and relationships in their lives—loving, troubling, good, bad, and hurtful. Sharing this assignment in a classroom setting requires one to become open and vulnerable to what others might think and say. Students are encouraged to be open, honest and above all real. It is not to be a mere performance but a sharing of the joys and struggles of what it is like growing up in their crazy world. They share stories of brokenness, pain, despair, incest, rape, cutting, abandonment, failure, physical and emotional problems, triumph, success, love, and hope. My students gather pictures showing their grandparents, parents and their childhood and put them together in a PowerPoint presentation. They also include pictures that recall dark moments in their lives as well as images that speak to loving and caring relationships. A significant relationship often relates to one or more of their favorite pets.

Qualitatively explicating their lives and identities, the narratives provide systemic meaning and empowerment for the youth. Narratives by youth may also explicitly reveal aspects of their experiences that can provide invaluable insight into how to develop potentially more comprehensive mentoring programs. The narratives, when delivered by college students or the struggling teens, has a profound effect on all who are present. The cosmos provides a recipe for everyone to be real with themselves and connect with each other on a soulful level. Both college students and teens express compassion as they identify with the pain that has been harbored and previously unexpressed.

Once they have shared their cosmos, students and former SPARK youth volunteer readily to come back and share their cosmos with new SPARK youth or before meetings of civic and business leaders. We have found that the cosmos is instrumental in igniting a spark in both the troubled youth and college students. It is during the sharing of their cosmos that the SPARK youth are drawn in most deeply. It becomes an instrument of leveling the "playing field," as the youth and the college students began to see that each of their backgrounds are not all that different. Most of the youth want their story to be heard—especially by college students whom they now trust.

Unique to this program is bringing the teens to a university setting, linking them up with pretty awesome college students, and meeting with a professor—none of which they have had previous experience. The success of the program relies heavily on the undergraduate students at the University of West Georgia. Without my 14 to 18 student volunteers, this program would fail miserably. Students, sharing their journeys and caring for the youth are integral to the how this program ignites hope in troubled youth.

Each program has a variety of the activities designed to encourage dialogue and working with each other in a playful environment. Starting each meeting with an icebreaker which promotes community building is a part of the program that everyone looks forward to. Every week students prepare an icebreaker and lead out in some fun activity. This is a very important feature to developing community and creating an energetic atmosphere. It is through this activity when everyone laughs, plays, has a genuine good time that they can be themselves, remove their masks and connect to each other through play.

College students are reminded about the importance of becoming active listeners. They quickly put into practice ways to invite youth to share their voices. This program provides many opportunities where students and youth can drift into small groups that are conducive to having open and meaningful conversations. It is very evident that most of the youth, when invited to dialogue with a college student,

are eager to open up and speak directly. Everyone has their own hiding places or walls, and are uncomfortable with meeting someone new, so the students must quickly learn and develop the art of opening dialogue and listening, without "digging," as to what is going on in the lives of the youth.

We intentionally open space for this dialogue through what is known as the "3rd thing." Trying to start a conversation with someone you just met can be awkward, uncomfortable, and somewhat intimidating, so we include refreshments as the "3rd thing" –something that we all enjoy. Eating is something we all do in common, is comforting and makes for dialogue to happen quite naturally. Every week my students are assigned to purchase, prepare, and serve refreshments. It is during these times my students connect most easily with the youth. Every week we stress to students that they must leave their comfort zone and seek out one of our SPARK youth. It is during these times that the SPARK youth are more likely to share about some of the struggles they are facing in life. We are quite attentive to not let the SPARK youth sit alone or together with their peers.

Inspiring guest speakers are also invited who have themselves experienced hardship and pain along their journey. Their talks encourage the youth that they are not alone and to not give up on themselves in spite of their deforming environments.

Other activities include African therapeutic drumming as a tool to assist teens working through emotional, behavioral, and social issues. This program requires everyone to find ways to work together and be supportive of one another. Drumming uses rhythm to promote a feeling of well-being and self-expression along with reducing feelings of anger and depression. This experience also helps them feel rejuvenated, alive, stronger than before and more hopeful. At the conclusion of the program everyone expresses a positive change in their energy level.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, many educators and high-risk youth have pretty much given up on the idea that this deforming culture will ever change and long for a sense of the possibility that their educational experience can offer something more than an enduring struggle for autonomy, purpose and meaning. Both educators and students long to fulfill their desire for personally meaningful learning experiences but are unable to perceive each other as practicing their deepest longings. The need for a re-visioning how to reconnect educators and students to each other and to ignite that mysterious spirit within each of us, which is the source of inspiration, motivation, meaning, forming intimate relationships, and knowing is within our understanding and grasp.

It is rather important that we, as teachers, are able to be authentic and true to ourselves. Students see teachers every day who come to school, put on a mask and live what Parker Palmer (1999) describes as a "divided life" in which the deeply held beliefs of the teacher are explained away when pressured by administrators or challenged by disempowered students. These kinds of teachers leave students longing for authentic classroom communities that seek to know and also to be known.

This program is designed to prepare pre-service teachers for the day when they will face students in their classrooms who appear apathetic, unmotivated, and maybe even ill-mannered, and will offer them some of their greatest challenges. SPARK offers them a first-hand experience to become involved in a truly challenging and emerging, open-ended adventure that is both exciting and personally rewarding.

A previous student that has been working with the program for several years now, explained her following experience:

> I am now teaching my own classroom and can only imagine how overwhelmed and unsuccessful I would be without having been part of the SPARK program. Because of "the cosmos" I learned not only how to embrace all of my students for who they are, not how they act or where they come from; but I also learned how to love myself and appreciate everything I have gone through, both good and bad.

> The teacher that my students see inside the classroom is the same person that they see when they run into me at the local grocery store. I do not want my students to think of me as an unapproachable person that only cares about their academics. Before SPARK, I thought that was what teaching was all about: grades and tests. I have found fulfillment now because I know what teaching really is. I eat lunch with my students, play football with them at recess, and show them pictures of my family. I am not just their teacher; I am their advocate. I would never have been able to form these relationships with my students if it were not for the SPARK program. My pedagogy has been forever changed, and for the better.

The SPARK program has demonstrated over the years that there is a way to reconcile the differences in our deeply held beliefs and ignite a spark that breeds hope. This model offers a new approach for our beginning teachers when responding to students who are perceived as a threat to their being an effective teacher. On completion of the program they arrive at a more complete and deeper understanding of what does not work with troubled youth and how effortless and worthwhile it is to connect with defiant youth. These soon to be teachers come away with more than another strategy to control students, they leave with a clearer picture of their identity and are no longer intimidated by high-risk youth. Many express feeling a deep bond with the youth. This unique "win/win" collaborative program is a model for transforming both high-risk youth but also pre-service teachers.

High-risk youth have been traditionally seen as pathological juvenile delinquents and myopically viewed through their acting out behaviors. This myopic focus on behavior modification quantifiable outcomes in schools, too often obviates alternative approaches to creating better connections with challenging youth. Ironically, these relationships and experiences have helped us to reframe high-risk behaviors into opportunities that potentially foster connections with youth (Brendtro et al., 2006).

It is important to re-cogitate how we understand the outcomes we seek and examine alternative approaches to building relationship with youth that give hope that things in their lives can change. The SPARK program provides an opportunity for aspiring teachers to reconsider two major topics: the lens through which to work with youth and begs the question of what are the youths' perspectives in how they perceive teachers and learning. Finally, how can teachers expect to improve and better serve our youth, if there is not a consistent representation of their voices?

While not exactly sure who benefits more (the soon to be teachers or the SPARK youth), the college students express how they have found this program to be life-changing. It has helped them to examine their own lives, to be more transparent and real, to help them move out of their comfort zone, to inspire them to do more service, and lastly it has helped to better prepare teachers to meet the diverse challenges in today's classrooms.

College students come into the program thinking they are going to "change" the youth, but most often something else changes. A typical response goes something like this: "The kids taught me way more than I could have ever taught them. I went in thinking I was going to change the kids, but I am the one that changed the most." In conclusion: "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." (Tolstoy, 1829-1910).

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