

Mentoring Empowers Gifted/Learning Disabled Students to Soar!

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The Wings Mentor Program, established by the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction of Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools, was developed to provide additional support to students with gifts who also have learning disabilities (G/LD) and highly able students who were not succeeding in the classroom. Students realize their creative and intellectual potential when paired with mentors who nurture them by increasing their knowledge and skills in an area of interest. The mentors, who have a background in education and/or experience working with children, are carefully screened and selected based on their knowledge in a specific field, and their ability to share their skills with young people. Mentors communicate with the classroom teachers so that the successful strategies can be transferred and applied to the classroom setting. The article includes an analysis of the program's components, the mentor/student/teacher partnership, and training practices.



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The excitement can be felt the moment one enters the balloon-filled auditorium. *You've Gotta Have Heart* is blasting across the room as students, together with their mentors, are busily setting up their projects. Parents proudly look on, sharing in their child's pride and high-spirited anticipation of the evening ahead. It is the *Wings Mentor Program Show-Off Night*, a special evening when the students come to display their projects, share their experiences, and celebrate their accomplishments. It marks the culmination of an eight-week program for gifted learning disabled and/or underachieving students.

Take a second glimpse at Show-Off Night. Freeze the moment. Hold the image of the smiling faces and know that what you do not see is the core of the program---the interactions and relationships that develop over the course of the 8 weeks -- the smiles, the pats on the back, letting the students know that they are valued.

The mentor program gave him an opportunity to shine at something that he is really good at. He absolutely could not stop beaming with pride about the presentation for a week! He loved sharing math with his classmates and adults at Show-Off Night. I saw Tom proud of himself for the first time. It was wonderful! [parent]

Unfortunately, this same sense of pride and self-confidence does not always exist for these students on a daily basis in the general education classroom. Often misunderstood, students with gifts who also have learning disabilities (G/LD) are sometimes regarded as lazy or apathetic.

Once considered a contradiction in terms, the concept of gifted students with learning disabilities has now been regarded as a phenomenon (Baum, 1994; National Association for Gifted Children, 1998) with all of its complexities and implications for educators. These are the students who, also able to participate actively in a class discussion, are unable to write a complete sentence. They are the students who rarely have homework completed, or if done, cannot find it. They are light years ahead in math, but reading below grade level. These same students may not only be able to program the computer, but they may be able to take it apart completely and put it back together again. Ask them about the Civil War, DNA cloning, lasers, or ancient civilizations and you might be bombarded with information and unique insights. Ask them to write about the same topic and they may produce little or nothing. Outside of class, they are the creative problem solvers and analytical thinkers who show strong task commitment when the topic is personally meaningful (Baum 1984; Baum, Owens, & Dixon, 1991; Whitmore, 1980). In school, however, they are frustrated by their inability to demonstrate academic achievement commensurate with their ability. When greater significance is placed on the disability, gifted students react with feelings of inadequacy (Baum, 1994) because of the inner conflict of knowing that they are bright and at the same time feeling frustrated by their shortcomings in school. The Wings Mentor Program was developed for these students.

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Research indicates that between 2 percent and 5 percent of all students are G/LD (Dix & Schafer, 1996; Whitmore, 1981). Based on these figures, there is, on the average, one G/LD student in every classroom. The field experience in Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has shown that once a learning disability is identified and the students receive services for both the giftedness and the learning disability, they develop an understanding of their areas of gifts and needs (Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Shevitz, 2002).

Modeled after a highly successful program called *The Gifted-Handicapped Mentor Program* for students in Westchester, New York (Putnum/Northern Westchester Board of Cooperative Educational Services, n.d.), the *Wings Mentor Program* was piloted in 1989 in the first MCPS self-contained G/LD classroom. As more information on G/LD students became available, it was soon evident that there were many students in the general education classroom whose needs were not being met. Therefore, the program expanded its scope to include highly able students who were underachieving in the general education classroom. Over a 14-year period, the *Wings Mentor Program* has served more than 600 students.

Guiding Principles

Jonathan has a great inquiring interest and style with projects we do at home! This program provided a clear picture for his teachers on how he performs with "hands-on" projects. He has a writing difficulty now, but the fire he has to learn is there. The program may help stimulate alternative methods for him to express his knowledge. He loved his mentor's style, she made him feel special at a time when "Why can't you do this" —was heavily felt. [parent]

The purpose of the *Wings Mentor Program*, established by the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction of MCPS, was to provide additional support to G/LD students who were not succeeding in the classroom. Students realize their creative and intellectual potential when paired with mentors who nurture them by increasing their knowledge and skills in an area of interest.

According to Baum (1990), G/LD students form a realistic self-concept when programs focus attention on the development of the gift and provide a nurturing environment that values individual differences. Therefore, the mentor program focuses on students' strengths and potential for success to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence.

The *Wings Mentor Program* is founded on four basic principles:

1. *Focus on Strengths*: The focus for gifted underachieving students is on their abilities. In the mentor program, the attention is directed to the students' strengths and interests and their potential for success.
2. *Build in Success*: The program is designed to maximize student success. By working one-on-one with a mentor in an area of interest, the program provides the students with an opportunity to be successful and gain an awareness of their abilities.
3. *Enhance Self-Esteem*: Through their successes, students gain self-confidence, which in turn may contribute to increased self-esteem. A desired outcome is that the students will become excited about school and begin to believe in themselves.

4. *Plant a Seed*: The intent of the program is to plant seeds for future success. Although the program may not be able to reverse the patterns of underachievement in such a limited time, it may serve as a catalyst for positive change.

Student Identification and Screening

I know that I have to crawl and I know that I can soar and I'll crawl to get where I want to go and you will help me soar or you will get out of my way. [G/LD student]

The mentor program serves approximately 25 to 35 students each semester in grades K-12. Most of the students in the program have been identified as gifted and many are identified as having a learning disability or are in the process of being evaluated. All of these students share three common characteristics: they are bright, they are underachieving, and they often have negative self-images. Because the giftedness and learning disability may often mask each other (Baum, Owens & Dixon, 1991), it is essential to maintain flexibility in the mentor screening and identification process. In this way, the program also serves as a tool for identifying the G/LD students and ensures that students are receiving the necessary support.

The earlier the intervention is provided—before patterns of underachievement are established—the better the outcomes. However, it is often not until grade 3 when the demands of reading and writing become greater, that these students have academic difficulties. The transition to middle school is another time when learning difficulties tend to surface. Few high school students participate because more difficulties arise when they miss class while engaged in mentoring.

The program often provides the needed support for students who are not reaching their potential but are not yet identified as having a specific learning disability. While students are being screened for special education services, the mentor program can provide opportunities to build their self-confidence and to help them gain an understanding of their gifts and needs. Students are referred to the mentor program by parents, school personnel, and the G/LD specialist.

The Mentor Coordinator

The mentor coordinator has several responsibilities and is involved in every component of the program to ensure its successful implementation. First, the mentor coordinator is responsible for identifying and selecting students and interviewing them to make appropriate matches. Second, the coordinator recruits and hires mentors, plans and implements periodic mentor meetings, and provides on-going comprehensive training. Third, the coordinator reviews the mentor session reports to ensure that the program objectives are being met. Fourth, the coordinator facilitates communication among students, mentors, parents and staff. Fifth, the coordinator is responsible for collecting and analyzing evaluations at the end of each session from parents, students, and school staff regarding the effectiveness of the program. Finally, the coordinator organizes the culminating activity, Show-Off Night.

The Program

The effects of this program will be long lasting, even in areas where we don't see immediate involvement. [teacher]

Once the students are identified, the mentor coordinator interviews each student in order to describe the program, determine the student's desire to participate, and identify individual interests. If a student wishes to participate, written permission is obtained from the parents. A mentor is then matched with the student based on the student's interests and the mentor's expertise.

The mentor meets the classroom teacher to arrange a schedule that has minimal impact on the student's routine. Mentors meet with their students during the school day for an hour each week for 8 weeks. During these sessions students explore their selected interests. Some students take this unique time to study, in depth, an existing area of passion, while others use the time to explore new areas. Student explorations have included such topics as robotics, simple machines in physics, shadow puppets, and civil engineering designs. Because the program is individually tailored to draw on the students' strengths and interests, the topics are as varied as the students who participate. The projects the students complete are hands-on and experiential. The students are able to direct their own learning while acquiring skills in problem solving, planning, goal setting, research, and organization. Most importantly, the mentors help the students learn new strategies and methods to circumvent their weaknesses, allowing them to demonstrate what they have learned in their areas of strength. By providing the opportunity for the students to select the topic to study and direct their own learning, the mentors validate the students' interests and ideas as well as validating the students as successful learners.

A major factor contributing to the success of the program is that it gives students a sense of autonomy. From the beginning, the students take ownership of the process and become primary decision makers; the students themselves choose whether or not to participate. They select their topics to study, decide how they will obtain information, and determine how they will demonstrate their knowledge and with whom they will share their final projects. The mentor program gives the students control of their own learning.

The Mentor/Student Relationship

I think you have had a major impact on my child that will help him for the rest of his life...just knowing that the real world may have a place for him is a tremendous boost. [parent]

I liked working with my mentor because I was working on something I liked. It also helped me feel special and smart. [G/LD student]

Obtaining the right mentor is crucial to the effectiveness of the program. All of the mentors have a strong education background or have experience working with children. They are carefully screened and selected based on their knowledge and their ability to share their skills with young people. Mentors are retired teachers, graduate students, private tutors, and professionals from the private sector including engineers and scientists. They are hired by MCPS as part-time employees. Through one-to-one relationships, mentors are able to help the students pursue an exciting topic, while aiding them in developing skills necessary to succeed in school. They bring a wealth of information from their own life experiences to share with students.

Although newly acquired knowledge and final products are important, the relationship that develops between the mentor and student is most significant. Throughout the weekly meetings, the mentors guide the students in an area of study and provide them with needed support. Although they are not counselors, they are trained to be constantly aware of and sensitive to the student's self-concept and to weave esteem-building strategies into their work where appropriate. It is the mentor/student relationship that serves as a catalyst for improving the students' view of themselves, empowering them to be successful in the classroom.

The Mentor/Teacher Partnership

The mentor program provided motivation and self-confidence to a student who was struggling with both. [classroom teacher]

Even though teachers have multiple roles and responsibilities, experience has shown that they are eager for information about the mentor program. They want to be informed of their students' progress and involved in the process. The transfer and application of the successful strategies of the mentor experience into the classroom is the desired outcome. Effective communication with the classroom teacher is essential.

From the beginning it is important that the teacher knows the goals of the program and the premise on which it was founded. Participating in a half-day in-service for teachers and mentors ensures that everyone has an understanding of the program, a common focus, and a vested interest in its success. It also provides a time for the mentor and the teacher to meet, schedule the time for the mentoring, and share information on the student to be mentored. If this is not possible, the coordinator and mentor make other arrangements with the teacher. A packet that contains information about the program, characteristics of G/LD students, and strategies for working with them is provided to all teachers who have a student participating in the program.

Information about the mentor sessions is recorded and disseminated weekly to the coordinator and the school. These reports provide a vehicle of communication for both the teacher and the coordinator. While working in the student's area of interest and strength, the mentor often discovers instructional strategies that work well and is able to pass them on to the classroom teacher through the reports as well as direct communication. In addition, the reports enable the teachers to have follow-up discussions with their students after the mentor leaves.

Evaluation

An evaluation is conducted at the end of each semester to determine the impact of the program. The parents and school complete a pre/post survey regarding the students' self-concept and self-efficacy. In addition, the mentor, student, parent, and teacher complete a final evaluation of the program. These evaluations have indicated that the mentor program improves students' self-concept, positively changes others' perceptions of them, and promotes their overall motivation in the classroom. Documentation of the students' participation in the *Wings Mentor Program* is sent to the schools and is placed in their cumulative folders so that future teachers are aware of the program.

Training

Because the G/LD student is truly a unique learner, it is essential for the mentors to understand the characteristics of gifted and learning disabled student and the complex nature of the "twice exceptional student" (Neilson, Hammond, & Higgins, 1992). Following the initial training, three training sessions are held during the year to cover topics such as the characteristics of G/LD students, reversing underachievement, Asperger's Syndrome, effective questioning techniques, and how to facilitate investigative research and the development of authentic products. The training is incorporated into the regularly scheduled meetings and is based on the needs that have been expressed by the group.

The mentors are also an invaluable resource for each other. They come together regularly as a group to discuss issues, questions, problems and successes. Because the mentors work in different schools across the county, having regularly scheduled meetings creates a sense of belonging, provides a forum to share ideas and resources and an opportunity to brainstorm solutions to problems.

At the end of each semester, the mentors have the opportunity to share their student successes, both through the projects and by describing the student's overall experience with the program. Pride is reflected in the mentors' faces as they speak about their students. The final meeting in June is reserved for program feedback and evaluation as well as to celebrate the mentors' dedication to the program.

Student Presentations

The best part of the mentor program was handling [handling] the snakes, making the little kids look up at me being on the stage and telling other kids about the sujet [subject] insted [instead] of them telling me. [G/LD student]

A group of first graders are spellbound by a "guest lecturer" who is sharing her knowledge about whales. The presentation was followed by many questions, one of which was, "Will you come back and teach us again?" The fourth-grade lecturer, beaming, looked toward the teacher for the nod of approval and said, "Sure, you tell me what you want to learn and I will research it and come back to your class." The class was giddy with excitement and so was the presenter.

In another classroom, a first-grader had mastered the basics of electricity and was presenting his newly acquired knowledge to his peers. When finished, he stood back and grinned. After the student successfully fielded a number of questions, a classmate raised his hand and said, "I used to think I knew a lot about electricity, but now I see that you are the expert."

After a student's presentation to her class on horses, the father approached the coordinator with tears in his eyes and told her that she could not imagine the positive impact that this had on his daughter. For a child who usually had difficulty with word retrieval to be able to stand in front of her class and share what she had learned was quite an accomplishment for her.

These are typical of the classroom presentations that are given by the students at the end of their mentor program. Originally included as a requirement in order to hold students accountable for what they learned in the mentor program, the final project presentation quickly became an integral part of the program. The presentations served as a tremendous self-esteem booster because the students received such positive feedback from their classmates. Often the presentation is the first time

that others see the G/LD student as gifted. Therefore, it was found to be a powerful tool for changing peer and teacher perceptions, as well as their own.

Conclusion

My child experienced success for the very first time in his life. [parent]

Jason was a student whose self-esteem was plummeting as he encountered difficulties in his learning. It had been one year since Jason, already recognized as gifted, was identified as having a learning disability, and the school had tried many interventions to help him to understand how he learned. According to his mother, nothing came close to contributing to his progress like the mentor program. She attributes the pride he has in his abilities to his feelings about the successful completion of his mentor project. His teachers saw the positive results of the time spent with the mentor spill over into the classroom, the most important result being his willingness to take risks again, after having felt defeated for a very long time. Now, seven years later, Jason is completing his senior year at the Einstein High School Visual Arts Center special program. He has qualified for a full scholarship to a leading university. He is busily preparing for his first one-man show at a local art center.

The mentor was able to quickly win Jason's trust and encourage his creativity. His fears about failing in school were allayed as the mentor focused on his strengths rather than his areas of need. Combining his interest in science and talent in art, he demonstrated his knowledge in front of the class, which earned him high regard among his peers.

The power of the *Wings Mentor Program* lies in the fact that it provides an optimal match and an ideal climate for the G/LD learner to become aware of his or her potential. It presents the process of learning at its best—when the student is actively engaged in his or her own learning. The mentor program is designed to allow for alternative products, enabling students to gain awareness of their capabilities and learning styles. While every student could benefit from the unique one-on-one attention that a mentor has to offer, the program is critical to those like Jason, who are at risk of failing and, yet, possess such great potential.

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