Reviewer's report

Title: The relationship between mentoring on healthy behaviors and well-being among Israeli youth in boarding schools: A mixed-methods study

Version: 3 Date: 1 September 2014

Reviewer: Stephen Edward McMillin

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses a unique and little-studied topic using a mixed method approach. This paper is of potential value because it is the first to investigate healthy behaviors in a unique boarding school setting that serves large numbers of at-risk and immigrant youth in Israel.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

1) Support the claim that the significant adult for Israeli youth in boarding schools actually are mentors. This paper simply doesn’t seem to be a study of youth mentoring as the term is generally understood, and the authors must show that these mentors are more than dormitory counselors or case managers.

a. Page 14, Line 18: That over 2/3 of the students did not have a positive perception of their mentor again makes me question whether these “mentors” are really providing mentoring (given the poor state of the mentor/youth alliance for so many students in the sample). If over 2/3 of students have not engaged their mentor in a basic positive way, it is very difficult to believe that they received youth mentoring as the term is generally conceptualized.

b. Page 17, Lines 17-18: “Formally, youth are required to choose at least two physical activities per week. In fact, mentors report that most of them do not.” So then what happens? How do mentors work with sedentary or underactive youth? This seems like a structural issue and it furthers argues against the idea that these staff are “youth mentors,” as these staff are portrayed as relatively powerless and disengaged on such health behaviors.

c. Page 25, Lines 14-16: “Conversely, mentors were actively encouraging positive school performance. They met weekly with teachers and actively followed school attendance and achievement.” This should be stated much earlier in the paper. What does “actively following school attendance and achievement” look like one-on-one between a mentor and a student? Do mentors review school performance with students as they do with teachers, if not weekly
then at least regularly? How do mentors engage in active encouragement to maintain or improve school performance?

2) Describe the analytic plan more fully:
   a. Page 13, Line 16-19: Did authors also transcribe the interviews from the recording, or did others transcribe?
   b. Page 13, Line 16-19: Did authors meet to compare and discuss emerging themes?

3) Provide much thicker qualitative description of the daily life of the school and what “mentoring” looks like within the school. The quotations from qualitative interviews often seem to argue against the claim that these staff were mentors, so additional quotations that show how staff engaged in mentoring activities is crucial.
   a. Page 18, Lines 14-16: “I have to focus on more basic things. Most parts of the day I have to solve conflicts between them or between them and the system.” Again, this sounds like intensive case management more than youth mentoring rooted in a personal relationship and geared toward empowerment and self-efficacy. “Mentors” don’t solve conflicts for students so much as they model self-regulation and self-efficacy so that the students can learn to resolve their own conflicts.
   b. Page 27, Lines 11-12: “Mentors have a major influence on school performance among youth, which is the area on which they concentrate.” This statement is not well supported in this article. The qualitative interviews suggest that “mentoring” in this context is crisis- and conflict-driven, concerned primarily with addressing problems students have with each other or larger systems. Only late in the paper in the discussion section do we begin to hear more about how mentors work closely with teachers. Nowhere in the paper are more objective measures such as grades, reading levels, or other test scores discussed, so it is very difficult to follow how “school performance” is conceptualized here.

- Minor Essential Revisions

1) Reduce repetition and edit both statistical methods sections for length and clarity.
   a. Pages 20-21 “Statistical Methods”: This is very repetitious with the “Statistical Methods” section on pages 11-12. I can see that on pp. 11-12 the authors describe how clusters were set and then on pp. 20-21 they summarize the quantitative findings, but why do they report qualitative findings in between these two sections?
   b. The authors are commended on their mixed methods approach, but they seem to emphasize the survey data over the qualitative interview data. The authors may wish to consider separating this project into two papers, a brief report to present the survey findings and then a full-length article to present findings from the 15 qualitative interviews.

2) Correct numerous typos:
   a. Page 2, Line 19 I suspect “not impact” is meant to be “no impact.”
b. Page 18, Line 2: I suspect “the neighbor” is meant to be “their neighbors” as in the quotation below.

c. Page 19, Line 21: I suspect “as a jock” is meant to be “as a joke.”

d. Page 20, Line 4: I suspect “to control over their eating habits” is meant to be either “to control their eating habits” or “to have control over their eating habits.”

e. Page 20, Line 16: “The students from Ethiopia are not familiar with this food.” This statement is italicized but set apart from the bloc quote above it and not included within quotation marks. Is it part of the quotation?

f. Page 25, Line 6: I assume “mentors explained that they have to ‘choose their bottles’ is meant to be “choose their battles.”

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published.

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.

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