EXAMINING INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT PRACTICES
in Secondary Schools

Resource Teachers

Québec

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1   Introduction

This document is a summary of a review of the literature on best practices in individualized support in secondary schools by Simon Larose of Université Laval.[1] The practices used by teachers, acting as resource persons, and by all those who work in individualized support, are presented in two areas of research: **educational support programs** and **mentoring programs**. The first area refers to support provided in groups and the second, to support provided one-on-one.

This document aims to present the results of studies that looked at resource teachers' practices and to provide these teachers with guidelines. Three complementary documents deal with the practices of **instructors and counsellors**, **program managers** and **administrators** respectively. These documents help explain how research looks at certain practices at different levels but with the same objective: educational success.

1.1 Collaborative practices

Individualized support mainly concerns the relationship between a teacher and a student. This relationship is developed within a larger system, so it can be influenced by outside practices. Individualized support can be considered to be one element of a system involving all those who work with students: the administrator (management practices), the program manager (organizational practices), the instructor who works with resource teachers (coaching practices), the resource teacher (support practices), and the parents. In order for a program to reach its goals, everyone involved must share the same vision of support, feel part of a team and use effective, recognized practices.

1.2 At the heart of support practices: resource teachers and their students

Since 2006, Québec school boards and secondary schools have had the option of releasing experienced teachers from up to 50% of their tasks so that they can give personal and pedagogical support to students at risk of dropping out. Using teachers as resource persons makes it possible to personalize the relationship between the teacher and the students, specifically, at-risk students.

Resource teachers have three duties:

▸ To give at-risk students individualized support and help them to find solutions to their problems

▸ To support and guide other teachers in becoming familiar with pedagogical practices that encourage students to stay in school

▸ To work with the school's complementary educational services for the benefit of at-risk students

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[1]   There are different ways to approach individualized support: from a relational point of view or from a pedagogical point of view. Simon Larose conducted his research from the relational point of view.

2   Intervention in educational support programs

Educational support programs, also known as advisory or homeroom programs, are presented here as a structure in which an experienced teacher or school staff member is teamed up with a small number of Secondary I students, usually 5 to 15. The teacher is released from up to 50% of his or her teaching workload to take on this responsibility. Most often, support is provided in **class** and in the context of a **school-wide program**.

The goal of providing support is to monitor a group of students, to advise them and to support each student individually in order to help them succeed and build ties with each other. Support should also help build stronger ties between students' families and the school.

2.1 Who should receive educational support?

All students, regardless of how vulnerable they might be, are offered support as a universal prevention measure.

✓ Various forms of educational support

Educational support can take different forms depending on the type of advisory program. These forms of support can be classified according to the nature of the activities involved and the needs to be fulfilled:

- advocacy programs that seek to meet students' emotional and personal needs through guidance and supervision
- community programs that seek to enrich students' social lives and their sense of belonging to their school through group activities
- skills programs that seek to consolidate personal skills relating to self-management, problem-solving, communication and academic organization through developmental guidance
- invigoration (motivational) programs that seek to reduce students' stress at school and allow them to recharge their batteries through fun activities
- academic programs that seek to increase academic performance and encourage students to stay in school through cognitive educational activities
- administrative programs that seek to inform students about general school business and keep them on top of student affairs

A number of studies show that educational support programs are beneficial to students and teachers in the following ways:

- ▶ enriching student-teacher relationships
- ▶ increasing the student's sense of being in control
- ▶ creating a climate of collaboration and equality
- ▶ providing more opportunities for students to work in teams and to share their personal experiences
- ▶ increasing altruistic behaviours
- ▶ reducing the use of illicit substances
- ▶ increasing the attention teachers pay to student behaviours

2.2 Types of intervention

Resource teachers use a variety of practices in their relationships with the students. These practices involve:

- ▪ structuring the relationship
- ▪ defining the form of interaction
- ▪ defining the resource teacher's approach

■ Structuring the relationship

Structuring the relationship involves defining the frequency, duration and form of the meetings.

✓ Managing time

The time allotted to meetings can vary from program to program: from 10, 25 or 40 minutes to one hour a day. Some schools prefer to use the morning periods early in the week, while others prefer the end of the day, and sometimes the end of the week, depending on the program objectives. Long-term programs require more preparation and planning by resource teachers and more resources from the school.

✓ Acting in the long term

A stable relationship between the students and their resource teacher is essential to the success of educational support programs, especially when these programs aim to prevent students from dropping out. Many programs stipulate that the resource teacher be matched with the same students throughout Secondary Cycle One. The nature of this relationship, its intensity and each person's role are reviewed during this period, in terms of the student's development and how well the program meets his or her needs.

✓ Controlling group size

Experts recommend that groups include no more than 12 to 15 students.

■ **Defining the form of interaction**

Regarding the content of the meetings and the means for providing support, some researchers suggest that the intervention themes, activities and format be clearly defined according to the expected results. For intervention with Secondary I students, the themes, activities and formats can be defined according to three types of programs:

- programs that aim to help students transition from elementary to secondary school
- programs that aim to create a learning community and a positive school atmosphere
- programs that aim to support students in their schoolwork

The most popular activities for students and teachers participating in educational support programs are as follows:

▶ celebrating birthdays

▶ discussing everyday problems and concerns

▶ involving young people in community service projects

▶ playing games

▶ choosing support activities and extracurricular activities that involve student-teacher participation

■ **Defining the resource teacher's approach**

Research suggests that it is important to involve resource teachers who have given serious thought to the fundamental principles and relevance of the practices they are about to use.

Specifying the fundamental principles of the practices

A study conducted in three American secondary schools shows that a **clear vision** of the following elements plays a significant role in the success of educational support:

▶ ways to support the students

▶ managing crisis situations

▶ organizing meetings

▶ role of and guidelines for the support person

▶ needs and professional expectations of the resource teacher

In summary, certain criteria should be used in educational support:

- keeping the support relationship stable and continuous
- providing a flexible structure for content and intervention
- fostering an approach based on the students' qualities and development
- making sure that the roles and guidelines are perfectly clear

3 Intervention in a mentoring context

Mentoring is a one-on-one support relationship between a student and a volunteer. The goal of this relationship is to meet the student's developmental needs. The mentor can be a teacher, an older student or a volunteer within the school or the community. Mentoring programs are based on the idea that a relationship of mutual trust, support and expertise can foster resilience to stress and help develop students' personal competencies.

3.1 Who would benefit from having a mentor?

Students who are offered a mentor have generally accumulated a number of risk factors that may include the absence of stable family role models or the presence of learning or behavioural problems, failure in school or problems with social integration.

> Numerous studies show that school mentoring can have positive effects on several aspects of students' adaptation to school, specifically the following:
>
> ▸ their attitude toward school
> ▸ their sense of belonging to the school
> ▸ their feelings of competence
> ▸ their perception of their relationships with teachers
> ▸ their presence in class and their motivation at school

3.2 Mentoring practices

Mentors use a variety of practices in their relationships with students. These practices involve:

- structuring the relationship
- defining the form of interaction
- defining the mentor's approach

■ Structuring the relationship

Structuring the relationship involves defining the frequency, duration and form of the meetings.

✓ Taking the time

Spending enough time together, often and over a long period is essential to developing good mentoring relationships. School mentoring programs usually require mentors to:

- commit to at least one school year
- meet their students at least once a week
- stay in contact with their students by meeting them, calling them, sending e-mails or using social networking

Mentoring relationships that last less than three months tend to have negative consequences on the student's feeling of competence and self-esteem. Those that last three to six months have very little impact on the student's development. The very act of assigning a new mentor to a student after the early termination of a previous mentoring relationship can also have negative consequences on the student's situation.

✓ Recognizing different forms of mentoring

In a school setting, mentoring can be individual (one-on-one), in groups or virtual (e-mentoring). According to the literature, **individual mentoring** carried out in person is the most beneficial for the adaptation and development of at-risk students.

Researchers are divided in their opinions of the other forms of mentoring:

- **Group mentoring** can help students develop their sense of belonging to a group, but it has little impact on their success at school.
- **E-mentoring** can be used to inform students of academic and career opportunities or to share work-related experiences. However, it presents significant challenges for mentors who want to develop a meaningful connection with students. E-mentoring can also lead to communication problems, interrupted relationships and concerns about confidentiality.

■ **Defining the form of interaction**

It is important to specify the content of mentoring meetings and the means for providing support, which can include discussions, solving personal or school problems, and joint participation in extracurricular activities.

✓ Being able to discuss anything

Many mentors spend the meeting time discussing different themes related to the student's personal, social, school or work life. These discussions can vary among mentor-student dyads.

✓ Doing activities together

Some mentors like to do social, cultural, school or science activities with the students. They might visit a museum, go to a movie, attend a lecture or practise a sport together. In most cases, it is the student who chooses the activity.

✓ Solving problems

Other mentors help to solve specific problems the student brings up. These might include conflicts with a teacher, problems with social integration at school, difficulties with time management or conflicts in romantic or family relationships. Research shows that problem-solving can have mixed results when it involves the student's schoolwork.

A few studies have examined the effects of these forms of interaction on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship and on the different aspects of student development. They have all come to similar conclusions: the mentor's and the student's joint participation in **structured activities** is an important ingredient in the quality of the support. In some cases, these activities have had convincing effects on student motivation and success. For some researchers, structured activities provide the **ideal context in which to build the essential relationship of trust** between mentor and student.

■ **Defining the mentor's approach**

It is important for the mentor to specify his or her beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and style of intervention.

✓ Choosing a style

There are two types of mentoring relationships: developmental and prescriptive.

By adopting a developmental style, the mentor seeks to establish a strong relationship, built on confidence. The mentor is flexible, non-directive and easily adjusts his or her plans. The mentor's primary concern is for the student's needs. The mentoring relationship is a special place for the student to experience new things and for the mentor to give him or her the support that is otherwise lacking. The student is systematically involved in making decisions such as choosing activities during the meetings or redefining the relationship if needed.

By adopting a prescriptive style, the mentor seeks to change the student, to modify his or her behaviour and to improve his or her academic performance. The mentoring relationship is a place to validate attitudes and behaviours defined by adults and by the program. The mentor is less inclined to change his or her initial expectations when they differ from the student's. The meetings are spent discussing means the student can use to reach the set objective.

The developmental approach in mentoring has been associated with more regular contact, a longer-lasting relationship and satisfaction for both parties. **The prescriptive approach** has been associated with more problematic relationships.

Mentor's approach and behaviour

Different studies have examined the effects of certain behaviours that mentors adopt during intervention. If the mentor is sensitive to the student's distress, and if the mentor practises active listening, shows empathy and recognizes the needs the student expresses, the mentor will feel more effective in his or her role, and his or her behaviour can affect the student's perceptions and social development.

Other behaviours that the mentor might exhibit include encouraging autonomy, giving useful feedback and supporting the student's sense of competence, which are all good indicators of students' social development and of the quality of their relationships with teachers.

An American study has shown that certain behaviours exhibited by mentors had a positive effect on the student-teacher relationship and on the student's ability to make decisions. Consider the following examples:

- asking the student's teachers about something positive the student might have accomplished in class and about any homework or projects to be completed that week
- meeting with the student 15 to 20 minutes per week in order to recognize any accomplishments, find ways to maintain the positive behaviour and get the student to do the homework and projects that have been assigned
- practising with the student to help improve a behaviour that he or she finds problematic, such as speaking to a teacher or his or her parents, or taking notes
- systematically following up on academic setbacks or any signs of lack of discipline, and discussing them with the student

Overall, a mentor is more likely to see the student create positive connections with the teachers when he or she:

- respects the student's interests and point of view
- gives the student a certain amount of control
- gives the student relevant information
- positively reinforces his or her competencies when the student goes through a difficult experience (e.g. failure at school)

3.3 Training mentors

Initial training for mentors, also called *pre-match training*, has positive effects on the quality and duration of their relationship with students and helps mentors get the sense they are being effective. It has been shown that, compared with mentors who have had more training, active mentors in programs for which they have had little training (under two hours) feel less comfortable with the task, spend less time with their students and are less inclined to continue their relationship after one year.

Information gathered about the different types of training and training practices is available in the document *Providing Guidance for Individualized Support Practices in Secondary Schools.*

In summary, in order to allow mentors to create meaningful relationships with students and to allow mentoring to have a significant impact on student development, certain conditions are considered essential: specifically, it is important to respect the structure of weekly meetings for at least six months, and most of the meetings must be held in person.

The criteria below are also considered essential:
- interaction and content that involve shared activities during mentoring
- an approach centred on the student and his or her development
- an approach that relies on sensitivity and support
- an approach that includes planning, support, guidance and clear agreement on the objectives and duties of mentoring

4 Conclusion

This summary highlights behaviours to adopt and support guidelines and criteria for resource teachers active in educational support and mentoring programs. These criteria take into account the time management of meetings and its adjustment according to the student's changing needs. They show the importance, for resource teachers, of defining how they will interact with the group or the student, and of mutual respect for the conditions in place. Defining the type of approach they will take allows resource teachers to develop a meaningful relationship with the students, which is essential for effective individualized support. Clarifying these intervention criteria can ultimately allow the programs to reach their objectives and enable everyone involved to share the same vision of support and use good practices, knowing they are part of a group.

Methodology

The articles reviewed in the report were selected from databases of articles published in the last 20 years about secondary students and about developing student-teacher relationships. The research also includes Web sites that list best practices in the fields of education and mentoring and that list programs, intervention guides or training guides available on the Internet.

Reference

Larose, Simon. *Les pratiques éducationnelles exemplaires en matière d'accompagnement individualisé au secondaire: Une analyse commentée des recherches des vingt dernières années.* Québec City: Université Laval, Groupe de recherche sur l'inadaptation psychosociale chez l'enfant (GRIP), 2011.

The full research report is available in French at the following address: www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/accompagnement.