findings

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Mentoring for vulnerable young people

Mentoring has become an important element of government strategy for supporting vulnerable young people. Building on previous work by one of the researchers, this qualitative study from Aberdeen University looked at the impact of mentoring on young people in three settings: a housing project and an education project where paid keyworkers acted as mentors and a befriending scheme where volunteers acted as mentors. The study found:

- The friendly nature of the relationship and the 'ability to have a laugh' with a mentor distinguished these from other kinds of relationship.
- Mentoring within all the projects offered a form of 'professional' friendship. This demanded delicate negotiation between young people and mentors of the boundaries of what they would discuss, levels of confidentiality, and the time devoted by both parties.
- Most young people found the experience a positive one, contributing to their confidence, skills and development in a number of ways. Mentors also expressed satisfaction, seeing it as giving them the chance to work with rather than on young people.
- Young people particularly valued mentors who shared and were willing to discuss similar backgrounds and experiences. They felt these relationships differed from those they had with other professionals and adults. A number had been inspired to become mentors or to work with young people themselves.
- A key benefit of a good mentoring relationship was in helping young people to come to terms with difficult family relationships.
- How the relationship ended could undermine the immediate benefits perceived by young people and reinforce feelings of rejection. Young people valued the opportunity to sustain an informal relationship on an occasional basis beyond the intervention.
- The researchers conclude that mentoring cannot remedy all the ills facing vulnerable young people but it can be a useful part of the range of interventions. The range of mentoring approaches, however, needs to vary to suit the requirements of individual young people.

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Background

Mentoring has become an important element of government strategy for dealing with vulnerable young people. Judging the effectiveness of such methods is hampered by a lack of understanding of some of the key ideas involved and also by the sheer volume and range of activities that are branded as 'mentoring'. This study built carefully on previous work by one of the researchers that had unpacked some of the key ideas behind the mentoring concept.

The research took place in three settings: a befriending project in a large city, a housing project for young homeless people and an alternative education project for young people who were excluded from mainstream schools. Within the befriending project, volunteers were matched one-to-one with a young person. A paid co-ordinator recruited, trained, matched and supported these volunteers. Within the other two projects, paid staff were employed as keyworkers and worked on both an individual and a group basis.

The young people involved in the study were variously described as 'socially excluded', 'vulnerable' or 'disaffected'. Many had experienced family problems and most had grown up in poverty. Within the education and housing projects, many had been excluded from school and this had been the reason for referral for mentoring. Within the befriending project, family difficulties and social isolation were more likely to lead to referral.

What characterises mentoring relationships?

Young people placed a high value on the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with an unrelated adult. Mentors from a similar social background - who were prepared to share experiences of this - often became a key figure for support, advice and the exploration of emerging issues.

> **"I know a lot about Duncan ... Because I was upset one night and he told me a lot about his past. That made me cry." [Teresa]**

The friendly nature of the relationship and the 'ability to have a laugh' with a mentor distinguished these from other kinds of relationship. Qualities of trust, shared control, reciprocity and shared experience underpinned successful mentoring. All of this contributed to mentoring as a safe means of reviewing areas that were risky to discuss elsewhere.

> **"Well I know Pilar is very confidential and if I don't want her to tell my mum or anything or anybody else then I know that she won't." [Sara]**

> **"She put me somewhere safe and gave me the chance to sort my life out." [Teresa]**

For some participants their relationship with their mentor created a safe space in which to tell their story and to rehearse what they would like to do with their lives. For many this helped them to develop ways of dealing with difficult situations and surviving in hostile environments. Key to this process was the opportunity to negotiate with the mentor, typically described as more likely to happen when 'you could have a laugh' with the mentor.

> **"He was one of the best befrienders that I have ever had basically, he was really funny, and somebody's personality makes a big difference … he was never moody or pessimistic or anything like that, he was just always great fun to be with." [Eric]**

> **"We used to just sit there and talk about who his last youth group person was, gradually we just talk about whatever, you know, what the issues are, and recently he came round to play computer games at my house and it was just like having one of my friends round." [Rory]**

In some instances, the mentor was not even the person allocated by the project but someone else within the project with whom they felt 'comfortable'. Within the befriending project, the co-ordinator often assumed this role, partly as she was a constant figure who brokered befriending relationships, 'picked up the pieces' when a match failed and was available to young people. Within the housing and education projects, familiarity with the social networks and local background enabled mentors to be aware of what was going on with young people outwith the project. In contrast, within the befriending project, the opposite was the case as some befrienders had no local knowledge. This enabled young people to have respite from their problems, to forget about their home situation and to 'have a laugh'.

How relationships developed

Building up and sustaining mentoring relationships could be problematic. For some young people a relationship with a befriender or a keyworker was simply one of a number of relationships with professionals or semi-professionals. Many had had experience with a number of professionals over a considerable length of time and held very negative views about these. Many described a lack of control over such relationships, complaining of frequent changes over which they had little say. They felt they were seen as a problem to be solved and were unhappy about this.

In contrast, others often described the mentoring relationship as a special one that went beyond professional limits and that was personal to the young person and their partner. Where mentoring was successful, the relationship had developed over time and was flexible enough to allow both partners to take different approaches. These young people commonly stated that the mentor did not act as if they were a 'case' or a problem to be solved.

> **"She really does care about me and my welfare, you know what I mean and what happens to us, whereas, Paul, just, well, I think he did in a way, I think he had a lot on his plate with work and that, so ..." [Lorna]**

Both mentors and young people pointed to the need over time to balance dependence and autonomy.

> **"There's nobody forced to come here so they've got that initial power of, 'Yeah, okay, I'll buy into this'. ... But I think it shifts back and fore with you giving them a wee bit of responsibility and maybe they'll chuck it back in your face but you've got to try and encourage them to become independent ... " [mentor]**

Continuity of contact was important: managing this demanded careful planning by mentors and the agency. Mentoring programmes (especially those which are tied to employment training) often neglect the process of ending the relationship. However, this could undermine the immediate benefits perceived by young people and reinforce feelings of rejection. This issue was highly significant for these young people.

> **"They just dropped me as soon as I went into college, and that was it, once she is in college she will be fine. I was really close to him and I trusted him and everything. I used to talk to him about things but it has just changed." [Sara]**

Young people also valued the opportunity to sustain an informal relationship on an occasional basis. This suggests that keeping this door open could be an important link for young people who are excluded from other kinds of provision or who 'fail' on moving on from the project.

> **"I wish I had still stayed with my workers ... because for a while after it I just went all to pot and I just never did nothing." [Maria]**

How mentoring links to other relationships

A key benefit of a good mentoring relationship was in helping young people to come to terms with difficult family relationships. Mentoring often allowed young people to explore different aspects of their identities and provided a starting point to consider their own skills in supporting others. Young people often attributed improved relationships within their family to their experience of mentoring. This led a number within the housing and education projects to express their aim to become mentors themselves or to work with difficult young people.

Existing peer relationships could be both supportive and negative but young people generally viewed them as important. However, there was little evidence of work with peer or friendship groups in any of the projects. Making new friends was risky and problematic for many of these young people, particularly in rural areas, because of the difficulties of 'living down' reputations. Some described mentoring relationships as building up confidence and skills to do this. Interestingly, friends were also identified as fulfilling mentoring roles in so far as they were prepared to challenge young people as well as support them.

However, young people did not always perceive planned mentoring as a safe way of addressing difficulties. Fears about being let down made some young people uncertain of its value and they were guarded about what they would disclose to mentors. This reluctance was based on knowledge that some information would be shared with other professionals. Some also felt that their experience of planned mentoring had reinforced feelings of exclusion and disaffection rather than enhancing their feelings of resilience.

> **"Say we had fall outs at home, I wouldn't talk to my mentor about that. I wouldn't want that information leaking out." [Rory]**

> **"In here everybody knows everything about you ... and that is scary ..." [Teresa]**

Young people often reviewed mentoring relationships more critically when they were leaving the projects. Some had felt very let down by mentors who had moved on and ended the contact; others felt that they might have benefited from the mentoring at a later date. Some young people felt that their own behaviour had made it impossible for mentoring to take place, noting that they were not ready to 'go half way' and negotiate a relationship. Others felt that the mentors had let them down by failing to negotiate over the ending or changed nature of the relationship.

> **"She left, just didn't keep in contact like she said. I hate when people say things they don't mean. And my mum is like, oh everybody says things that they don't mean. And I am like, well, when are they going to stop,**

> eh? Aww, lots of people have let me down ..." [Amanda]

Mentors' perceptions

Mentors from all projects expressed satisfaction at the chance to work *with* rather than *on* young people. Many claimed to draw on their personal experiences and backgrounds as a guide to their work. Befrienders emphasised the social welfare aspect of helping someone less fortunate than themselves; keyworkers were more likely to say that they wanted to help young people avoid some of the difficulties they themselves had experienced in growing up.

Mentors frequently viewed their role as guiding young people as to what constitutes acceptable social behaviour. Volunteer befrienders emphasised the social nature of their role, while paid keyworkers were more concerned with changing behaviour.

> "It has taken a long time for her to see that that wasn't normal, that this is not how you behave when you are out and about ... so I used to show her up rotten. Because she did it to me and I know it sounds cruel but ... it was the only way that I could be comfortable ... to take her down the street." [mentor]

Many talked about their role as providing a bridge between young people and workers with more formal professional roles. Within all the projects there was therefore some tension between managing the behaviour of young people and helping them to reach their potential.

Project workers and volunteers were realistic about the impact of their work on many of these problems. Nevertheless, there was some consensus among the workers that many young people in the sample had untapped potential and that mentoring could develop this.

> "I think that some of these kids have got a lot of courage and there's a lot more to them than they often give you reason to believe." [mentor]

Many mentors pointed to the resilience, strengths and capacity of vulnerable young people. Many keyworkers were suspicious and ambivalent about the role of peer groups, feeling these could undermine their work with individual young people.

Mentors felt that building a relationship demanded consistency, flexibility and a mix of support and challenge from both themselves and the young people. Setting boundaries was a delicate process; mentors had to be sensitive to individual cases and some took a flexible approach to project guidelines. Dilemmas in managing one-to-one relationships were evident. In contrast to the accounts that young people gave of the relationships as 'special', mentors were more likely to view their role as falling within a professional framework.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that mentoring cannot remedy all the ills facing vulnerable young people but it can be a useful part of the range of interventions. However, to be effective the range of mentoring approaches needs to suit young people's individual circumstances. Existing typologies of mentoring and befriending do not address the variety of styles of mentoring described by young people in this sample. The researchers suggest that developing 'mentor rich' environments, with a climate favourable to the development of mentoring relationships may be critical to success.

About the project

This project was carried out by Kate Philip, Caroline King and Janet Shucksmith of the University of Aberdeen, building on earlier work by Kate Philip.

The qualitative study used a mix of methods, including analysis of existing literature and documentary evidence, observation, individual and group interviews, and case studies. Two rounds of interviews took place with young people who were actively involved in mentoring relationships at the first interview (18 in the first round and 15 in the second). 14 young people who were no longer involved in the projects were also interviewed. Interviews were held with 15 mentors, 7 parents and 10 key informants (carers, managers and stakeholders).

How to get further information

The full report, **Sharing a laugh? A qualitative study of mentoring interventions with young people** by Kate Philip, Caroline King and Janet Shucksmith, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 165 4, price £13.95).

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