An Evaluation of Mentoring Young People Excluded from Mainstream Education

Charlotte Watkinson

Liverpool John Moores University

December 2017

Contents

1. Introduction

Mentoring young people has become more commonplace and popular over recent years, as an intervention for at risk or troubled youth (Zilberstein and Spencer, 2017). Mentoring programmes often aim to create supportive relationships between an adult mentor and a young person, the mentee. In this research, staff at an education facility for young people who have been excluded from school provide mentoring and support to the young people. Mentoring in this instance is often in a group setting, based in a timetabled classroom session. However, some young people will require further one to one mentoring which is also available.

This discreet research project emerged out of contact made with a youth mentor supporting young people during another piece of research. This project aimed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses to providing such support to young people who are excluded from mainstream education based upon the engagement with 4 young people. The concept of mentoring young people is vastly under researched, yet becoming more commonly used. This small scale project uncovered the views of young people being mentored and the views of those mentoring. This research will provide an insight in to the strengths and weaknesses to mentoring a young person through the model currently used at Assess Education. The research will develop a better understanding of where mentoring is at its strongest and the areas where it could be improved.

2. Research Aims

The aims of the research are:

- To understand and explore the experiences and views of youth workers mentoring the young people.
- To understand and explore the experiences and views of the young people being mentored.
- To develop an understanding as to what barriers and success both the mentors and mentees have experienced.

3. Research Questions

The research aimed to capture views based on the following principal research questions;

- What are the benefits of mentoring a young person?
- What are the challenges to mentoring a young person?
- Are there common experiences amongst the young people in regards to being mentored?
- How receptive are the young people to mentoring?
- How has mentoring supported their education?

4. Methodology

The research aimed to capture the views and perspectives of all involved in mentoring at the education facility. Therefore, both the young people being mentored and the staff providing the mentoring and support were accessed for the evaluation.

The primary data method chosen for this research was purely qualitative, and concerned with capturing the opinions and perspectives of those involved in mentoring. In order to gain the perspective of the young people, a small focus group was conducted with 4 young people who were at the time subject to mentoring support at the school. The focus group was conducted in a timetabled session within the school and consent was provided by all participants and relevant staff. To gain an insight from the mentor's perspective, two members of staff responsible for providing mentoring and support to the young people took part in a semi structured interview. Again, these interviews took place within the school and consent was again provided. Therefore, a total of 6 participants are captured in this study. Although only a small number, interviews and focus groups covered the key research questions and aims and uncovered key trends and themes.

5. The Current Evidence Base

For young people currently in the high school stages of their lives, they are often experiencing many different difficulties. These may be educational related, personal or family difficulties and other peer related stresses. Dolan and Brady (2012) argue that some young people can fall behind their peers in this stage of their life and become alienated and disconnected from school. They argue that this type of alienation can lead to academic and peer based problems, and also behavioural problems which may impact on young people leaving school. Leffert et al (1998) state that there is a clear association between early school-leaving and socio-economic disadvantage in later life.

School based mentoring projects have become more commonly developed over recent years, to support young people excluded from mainstream education who require support. In this case study, mentors are professional staff who have experience and skills in mentoring and providing guidance to young people. This means that the mentor and mentee meet on school grounds, normally in their usual teaching room, this can be on a one to one basis and also in a group setting. Dolan and Brady (2012) suggest that this type of mentoring is more likely to result in academic outcomes but can also have an impact on relationships and emotional wellbeing.

For this project, the young people being mentored have the mentoring scheduled in to their weekly school timetable. Dolan and Brady (2012) suggest that this timetabled approach reaches young people who would not necessarily have access to mentor support elsewhere, if they were not attending this school with timetabled sessions. Solomon et al (1996) claim that successful school based, adult-youth, mentoring programmes can increase social support within the school by bringing in supporting adults from the local community. This is exactly what this mentoring scheme provides, young people who have been excluded being mentored by a community leader(s) who has experience of supporting young people.

One of the key aims of this mentoring support, is to encourage academic development and also support the young people to develop and maintain relationships. Herrera et al (2011) argues that supporting young people in an educational setting can help young people in a variety of different ways. In particular, they discuss the idea of developing the social skills of young people being mentored which in turn helps them to communicate with family, peers and teachers. If mentoring can impact on the young person's social skills they will feel more confident in their relationships and settled encouraging them to perform better academically.

Herrera et al's (2011) research was one of the largest studies of school based mentoring, involving 1139 young people. They were either assigned to a treatment group, where they received mentoring, or a control group, who did not receive mentoring. They measured outcomes based on school performance, attitudes, problem behaviours and social/personal wellbeing. The study found that after a period of 5 months of mentoring, the young people

had improved their academic outcomes, and were more likely to report that they had an adult in their life that supported them.

Pawson (2004) reviewed research evidence in relation to various types of mentoring programmes. The results of that review presented that peer mentoring between young people was not as successful as adult and youth mentoring relationships. Therefore, this research review supports the mentoring style and approach that this project is evaluating. Pawson's (2004) research also suggested that for the mentoring to be successful goals need to be set and agreed by both the mentor and mentee themselves, to enable them to take an individual approach.

There is somewhat a growing body of research around supporting and mentoring young people in an educational setting, but it remains limited and has produced mixed results regarding its effectiveness (Dolan and Brady, 2012). A consistent theme that has been captured across different research studies is that there is a 'reduced dosage' in school based mentoring as each week, mentees may engage for less time (ibid). This is a risk that would need to be considered and addressed by the mentoring team.

Wheeler, Keller and DuBois (2010) examined three evaluations in the USA finding six outcome areas.

1. Reduced truancy
2. Reported presence of a supportive non-familial adult
3. Perceptions of one's academic abilities
4. School related misconduct
5. Peer support
6. Absenteeism (failure to appear regularly for mentoring)

They concluded that an average of one year of mentoring a young person could have modest effects on each of these factors for the mentee.

Dolan and Brady (2012: 103) suggest the following advantages and disadvantages of school-based mentoring between an adult and young person.

Advantages:

- Young people who are having difficulties at school can receive one-to-one support;
- It provides a different range of support to young people;
- They bring new resources and perspectives in to schools that can help both the young people and also teachers; and
- The structure of having a timetable enable more commitment.

Disadvantages

- The relationships developed between the young person and mentor for sharing experiences may be limited as it is often taking place in an educational setting, which may be perceived as restrictive.
- As with all mentoring, at some point they come to an end.

Youth mentoring has become popular as an intervention for at risk youth (Zilberstein and Spencer, 2017). Research does show that support can have a positive change across social, emotional, behavioural and academic areas (ibid). For some of these young people captured in this research they are at risk of involvement in antisocial behaviour and minor criminality. Whilst there is no strong research to suggest that mentoring young people will reduce anti-social behaviour or offending, Jolliffe and Farrington (2008: 8) found evidence that mentoring could reduce offending by 4-10%. However, although research evidence is slim in terms of impacting on offending behaviour, studies show that mentoring can have a positive impact on reintegrating youth in to education and training activities, which can lead to improved numeracy and literacy skills (Dolan and Brady, 2012). This links directly to the mentoring scheme evaluated within this report.

6. Findings

Based on the data collected, the below discussion highlights the emergent themes that were captured from all participants. In turn the focus is upon the strengths and then weaknesses of the current mentoring provision.

Strengths

All participants identified with the following strengths.

Enables Young People to Focus on What Matters to Them

It was clear that the current mentoring form enabled the young people involved to be able to discuss and focus on issues that mattered most to them. This may not always be something school or academic related, but by having a mentor they were able to raise wider topics and discuss them. There was a real sense of appreciation for being able to pick a topic that mattered to them and be able to discuss it as a group in the classroom with the mentor and sometimes in a one to one situation with the mentor.

This was exemplified by the young people when they highlighted that they had discussed the role of the police and young people's relationships with the police. The young people engaged in a discussion with the mentor and also the mentor was able to bring in two Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) to further develop that discussion. It was felt that this helped shape the young people's own perceptions and interactions with the police.

It was agreed by all that this was crucial for the mentoring system as it enabled the young people to be able to steer the support and mentoring that they required. Participants agreed that although mentoring can have a positive impact on their educational attainment, being able to discuss topics relevant to the young people, which may not be deemed 'academic' in focus, but allowed their wellbeing to develop which in turn would support them academically also.

Real Life Advice and Guidance

All participants reported that they felt a freedom to discuss issues relevant to the young people and for the group to receive real life advice and guidance from the mentor.

For some of those being mentored, they were experiencing wider problems outside of their educational life but benefited from being able to highlight some of these issues, discuss them and be given support. Indeed, mentoring staff questioned whether the young people involved would be able to access other forms of support and in their mind heightened the

value of the engagement activity being delivered. It was a real benefit of mentoring that support was not just educational focussed, but relevant to the young people's lives.

Identify 'warning signs' for Young People

In relation to the above findings, being able to discuss topics relevant to the young people enabled them to open up to their mentor which in turn allowed the mentor to be able to identify where there were potentially problems for the young person, and create the support and guidance required. This theme was captured from the mentor's perspective mainly.

An example of this was mentors quite often noticed that young people may not have had any breakfast before attending school. Although this may seem minor, it was argued that this impacted upon how engaged they were both in mentoring sessions and taught academic sessions. By the mentor being able to identify this and change this, it helped change the young person's engagement. Sometimes something like not having had breakfast indicated to things occurring at home for that young person which the mentor could then highlight and monitor.

Although the young people are predominantly there for educational purposes, all felt it was important to understand what was going on around them, to be able to identify any problems that would impact upon the young person. Without a mentor assessing this issues would not be identified and young people may not be fully supported.

Strong Relationships with Mentoring Staff

It was agreed by all that young people develop a strong relationship with the mentoring staff. This was firstly because they meet with the mentor in scheduled session three times a week. More importantly for many of the young people they did not view the mentor as a member of academic staff but someone they could talk to. As identified above this enables young people to be supported and any issues identified. By keeping the mentor separate to staff teaching more core topics such as English and Maths, it was clear that relationships could be developed between the mentor and young person.

Weaknesses

All participants identified with the following weaknesses.

Engagement

The key weakness that was identified in all participants was engagement between the young person and mentor. This was argued to be normally at the beginning of the mentoring process and sometimes, at the beginning of a mentoring session. It was discussed

by mentors that other things may be impacting upon this and preventing young people from fully engaging in some sessions. For example not having had any breakfast or not had a full night's sleep. Also at the beginning of mentoring, for some young people they do not instantly see the benefit of being supported or talking to someone about different things relevant to them. However, the young people were more likely to talk to a mentor than another member of staff it was argued although they may initially find it hard to open up.

Not Academic Support

Mentors discussed the idea that they had to manage the expectations of both parents and the young person regarding mentoring as it was not viewed as academic support or related to GCSE's. For some mentors they had to manage the expectations of parents and explain why the young person is being mentored or provided with that support. However, it was argued that the initial thought is that the young people require support for more traditional subjects such as maths and English. This was also sometimes felt by the young people, yet they enjoyed the mentoring sessions and their expectations were easier to manage.

Classroom Setting

For this particular mentoring, the majority of the sessions take place in a classroom setting, in a scheduled timetabled slot. For mentors they felt that the young people were in the classroom being mentored too much sometimes and believe the mentoring would benefit from being able to take the young people outside the classroom to support them on some occasions.

Time Available

For this particular mentoring, young people are often only at the school for a short period of time and not all young people are there for the same period of time. Therefore, there was an inconsistency in how long each young person was supported by the mentor. Having a set period of time that is a little longer was argued to be more favoured. For the young people they were aware that their peers and they may move on from the school after short periods of time.

7. Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that there are both benefits and challenges to mentoring young people excluded from mainstream education. The main benefits included enabling young people to focus on issues that matter to them, gain real life advice, issues can be identified and relationships can be developed. Of the challenges to mentoring young people these included engagement, mentoring not being viewed as academic support, being in a classroom too much and time available to mentor. These strengths and challenges were the common experiences and opinions amongst all young people and the mentors. It was clear that the young people were receptive to mentoring but the key challenge of engagement had to be overcome. It can also be argued that the overall strengths identified here do contribute to support the young people's education overall as discussed.

8. Bibliography

Dolan, P. and Brady, B. (2012) A Guide to Youth Mentoring: Providing Effective Social Support, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Herrera, C., Baldwin Grossman, J., Kauh, T.J., and McMaken, J. (2011) 'Mentoring in schools: An impact study of big brothers big sisters school-based mentoring', *Child Development,* 82, 1, 346-361

Jolliffe, D. and Farrington, D. P. (2008) The Influence of Mentoring on Reoffending, Available http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/people/academic_research/david_farrington/mentorsw.pdf [Accessed: 04.12.17]

Leffert, N. Benson, P., Scales, P., Sharma, A., Drake, D., and Blyth, D. (1998) 'Developmental assets: Measurement and prediction of risk behaviours among adolescents', *Applied Developmental Science,* 2, 4, 209

Pawson, R. (2004) Mentoring Relationships: An Explanatory Review, Working paper 21, London, ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, Available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/37696728/pawson_article.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1511963127&Signature=unYIKOdC5G66nHTxwaOLPT1trF4%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DMentoring_relationships_an_explanatory_r.pdf

Solomon, D., Watson, M., Battistich, V., Schaps, E., and Delucchi, K. (1996) 'Creating classrooms that students experiences as communities', American Journal of Community Psychology, 24, 719-748

Wheeler, M.E., Keller, T.E., and DuBois, D.L. (2010) 'Review of three recent randomised trials of school-based mentoring', Social Policy Report, 24, 3, 1-24

Zilberstein, K. and Spencer, R. (2017) 'Breaking bad: an attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationship closures', *Child and Family Social Work,* 22, 67-76