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A synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending for The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation

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The Rowan Group, University of Aberdeen, July 2007

The research reported here would not have been possible without the willing co-operation of many projects and providers of mentoring interventions who were unfailingly generous in offering accounts of their work. We would also like to thank Ray Pawson for the use of his model and all the participants in the ESRC seminar series on youth mentoring who provided food for thought in the writing up of this report. Special mention must be made of the support from Jennifer Boyd and Elizabeth Robertson from the School of Education at the University of Aberdeen. We are particularly grateful to Steve Matthews and Jeanette Boyd for making available materials held by MBF and for their unflagging commitment to this report. Of course any errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.



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Designed and printed by Shanleys.

A synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending

Introduction

This review of published research on mentoring and befriending brings together evidence about research and practice in youth mentoring and befriending in the UK. It explores findings from academic literature and includes evidence from reports and summaries of mentoring and befriending projects from the UK.

A considerable number of young people and volunteers have taken part in mentoring and befriending relationships in the UK in recent years. A number of reports have indicated that the experience of mentoring and befriending can be enjoyable and a positive experience for both mentors and mentees. However, research evidence about the value of the intervention has been at best mixed due largely to the complexity of approaches that exist and the lack of any longitudinal research.

This synthesis explores some of these questions in relation to current research on the topic. It is important to take a hard look at mentoring and befriending and the ideas behind these forms of intervention in order to gain the most from work with young people.

Since much of the research has focused on mentoring rather than befriending, the findings reported here tend to emphasise mentoring.

The context for mentoring and befriending - young people, transitions and vulnerability

- Transitions for all young people pose increasingly complex challenges, many of which have not faced previous generations (p13)
- Disadvantaged young people are likely to bear the brunt of structural changes and some will experience an accumulation of disadvantage over the lifecourse (p14)
- Definitions of young people as vulnerable or excluded are contested and encompass a wide range of backgrounds, needs and aspirations (p14)
- The concept of the risk society has been used to explain the changes in late modernity and the effects of globalisation. In this context, young people face both opportunities and risks with few safety nets to protect the vulnerable (p14-15)
- A social capital framework may help to explain how mentoring processes relate to support available from family, peer and community networks (p15-17)

Psycho-social theories and youth mentoring and befriending

- Theories of resilience, attachment and ecological theory have influenced the development of mentoring. However these have failed to locate young people as active participants and are limited in explaining the interaction between structure and agency on transitions and expectations. (p19-23)

Mentoring and UK policy – an emerging infrastructure

- Government has given considerable attention to mentoring and set up or supported a range of schemes across the country. Organisations such as the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF), BNS (Scotland) and the Scottish Mentoring Network have supported this development and worked towards building up guidelines, standards and understanding about the value of mentoring and befriending (p25-30)

Defining mentoring and befriending

- Befriending is more established since it has been a feature of the social care landscape for more than twenty five years. However it has attracted less attention than mentoring (p31)
- Mentoring and befriending are similar in many respects but it is important to highlight the distinctive elements of each in order to evaluate interventions based on these models (p31, 36)
- Mentoring and befriending are often part of larger projects or schemes and assessing the benefits of this element is problematic since many of these start from different points and emphasise sometimes competing agendas
- Befriending emphasises the value of a strong relationship between the participants and although other developments can take place, these are incidental (p31, 39)
- Mentoring cannot take place without a strong relationship being built up but in general, it includes other goals (p 31, 39)

- Both forms of intervention aim to build resilience in young people and to help them to survive challenges and difficulties in their lives (p38)
- Both work with young people who are experiencing difficulties. These young people may be disaffected for a variety of reasons and this may demand different approaches (p38, 47)

Interventions

In reviewing interventions in this field it is important to be aware of the difficulties facing evaluators and to note some key challenges. Firstly it is difficult to isolate the impact of the mentoring and befriending interventions from other initiatives or the overall programme in which these are embedded. Secondly, caution needs to be exercised in comparing findings from different studies, since both interventions and evaluations may have different starting points, aims and methods. Finally the term ‘mentoring’ holds different meanings for different participants and is used in many different ways. While befriending is a less contested term, there are considerable questions about the underlying assumptions about this form of intervention (p43-44)

Positive findings

- Those who took part in mentoring, who developed meaningful relationships and who continued to meet with their mentors over time, reported increased social confidence and feelings of social support (p45, 49, 50, 52)
- For some young people, where a meaningful relationship developed with a befriender or a mentor, it offered a positive alternative to other relationships with professionals and family, providing support, the possibility of a reciprocal relationship and challenge (p45, 47, 49)
- For a number of young people, successful mentoring and befriending offered a springboard to renegotiate previously problematic relationships with family and social networks (p46-47, 51)
- A mix of mentoring/befriending and other interventions appeared to be valuable for successful outcomes but it was difficult to disentangle the benefits of mentoring itself (p44, 52-53)
- Young people leaving care, particularly valued the ‘soft skills’ of the befriending elements of the mentoring schemes (p49)

- Building and sustaining mentoring relationships is a fragile and uncertain process demanding considerable time, skill and persistence which is sometimes not available within the resources available to mentoring interventions (p45, 50)
- In some programmes, those who reported meaningful relationships with mentors, were more likely to return to education or training and to do reasonably well than those whose relationships failed (p44)
- For some young people, involvement in a meaningful mentoring or befriending relationship was linked to increased involvement in their community (p46-47)
- Mentoring and befriending programmes that were well planned and which followed clear systems for recruitment, training and support to both mentors and young people were more likely to offer the *potential* for meaningful mentoring to develop. However evidence was mixed on this with questions arising around 'programme integrity' and the level of adherence to such systems (p46, 52)

Negative findings

- A number of studies have examined 'mentoring' with offenders or young people who are defined as at risk of social exclusion but this kind of mentoring is based on imposed rather than voluntary relationships and findings need to be treated with caution (p48)
- Several UK studies have found mentoring had little impact on offending behaviour and some participants were *more* likely to be involved in criminal activities *after* being mentored, than those who did not take part. It may be the case that mentoring programmes are not suitable for certain groups of young people (p46)
- Many young people rejected the opportunity to be mentored or befriended and substantial numbers dropped out of schemes (p46)
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining potential mentors and befrienders were evident. The absence of male mentors/befrienders was a recurring issue (p52)
- Mentoring schemes in prison seem to offer benefits but these do not appear to last beyond the prison gates (p49)

- Large numbers of those involved in mentoring projects failed to develop relationships at all (p46, 50)
- The endings of relationships, when a strong relationship has been developed, can be very problematic. This is particularly evident when endings are poorly planned but can also be true despite planning by agencies. This was true in both befriending and mentoring relationships (p51)
- The realities of managing mentoring projects with limited budgets, high turnovers of personnel, uneven skill bases and challenging target groups posed considerable challenges (p52)

Conclusions

There is a rich and broad range of work taking place under the banner of mentoring. It is clear that within the wealth of mentoring and befriending practice, some important strands of work are being undertaken. However, the picture of mentoring across the UK is very much of a patchwork of effort and a number of tensions are evident. Much of this relates to the diversity of provision and the ways in which mentoring is in danger of becoming a 'catch all term'.

A tentative model based on previous work and on the findings from this review is offered as a means of highlighting the complex picture of mentoring and befriending across the UK.

Recommendations for further research

- 1 Evaluation needs to be more theoretically based and should relate to current theoretical work on youth transitions vulnerability and the wider social and economic frameworks
- 2 Practitioners and managers of schemes should have access to current debates and discourses about young people, their development and their social contexts
- 3 Evaluation strategies should take account of longitudinal aspects of relationships between young people and mentors. Recognition of both short term and long terms implications could assist in planning interventions
- 4 More investigation is required into the impact of mentoring and befriending on families, peers and communities

- 5 Examination of the value and challenges faced within long term mentoring and befriending interventions is urgently required. More intensive scrutiny of mentoring and befriending relationships over time may be particularly useful in identifying pointers for this
- 6 Better intelligence about which groups of young people and which circumstances are most amenable to mentoring/befriending interventions is required
- 7 Attention needs to be paid to the interaction between different styles of mentoring that may exist in the lives of those targeted by mentoring or befriending interventions
- 8 The potential for linking internal and external evaluation strategies should be explored. This could yield insights into key dimensions of mentoring for example in examining the different interpretations held by young people, mentors/befrienders, managers, young people and other stakeholders. Making links between external and internal evaluations could build a more rounded picture of mentoring and could contribute to a stronger relationship between research and practice
- 9 Examination of the ways in which mentoring and befriending relate to other forms of intervention and other forms of support is required
- 10 Examination of the ways in which mentoring and befriending relate to other forms of intervention and other forms of support within young people's social networks may yield valuable insights. A 'portfolio' of support which includes mentoring/befriending may be more valuable than stand alone interventions
- 11 Study of schemes where retention of mentors and befrienders has been successful may offer a fruitful area for exploration
- 12 Examination of resilience of young people and their families living in difficult circumstances, over time, may reveal factors which could assist in the planning of future mentoring and befriending interventions
- 13 More understanding is required of relationships between young people and their mentors/befrienders which do not necessarily move into meaningful 'mentoring' relationships
- 14 Analysis of the underlying reasons for 'failed' relationships is urgently required

Introduction

This review of published research on mentoring and befriending brings together evidence about research and practice in youth mentoring and befriending in the UK. This represents a new approach in bringing together published research on these concepts which are clearly linked but which have developed in parallel rather than together. This synthesis enables linkages and differences to be made with the intention of highlighting potential for synergy between the two concepts. Overall the review sets out to locate befriending and mentoring for young people within a coherent framework.

Involvement in a planned mentoring relationship has become a feature of the lives of a considerable number of young people in the UK in recent years. It is a concept that has great appeal and anecdotal reports have indicated that the experience of mentoring can be an enjoyable and positive experience for both mentors and mentees. Accounts given by young people to mentoring conferences and events have reinforced beliefs that mentoring can play a positive part in supporting young people to navigate their way to adulthood. On the face of it, mentoring appears to be a common sense approach to the complex array of issues and difficulties that face young people, particularly those who are growing up in poverty and disadvantage.

However, research evidence about the value of the intervention has been at best mixed due largely to the complexity of approaches that exist and the lack of any longitudinal research.

Befriending on the other hand has been a feature of the policy landscape for a considerable time although it has not attracted the same fervour among its supporters as mentoring. It has a low key image and although there are around 800 projects in England and Scotland alone, it remains very much in the background. Befriending takes place across age groups and offers an additional relationship to individuals who experience social isolation for a variety of reasons. Claims for the benefits of befriending have emphasised the modest benefits of the introduction of an unrelated adult into the lives of vulnerable young people ranging from young children to young adults. Thus befriending is frequently described as an adjunct to other services, supporting the work of the caring services and providing respite for young people and their families for a brief interlude.