

Workshop 26:
**Mentoring as a program for reducing recidivism
among young offenders**

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Cleveland Education and Training Centre is situated within the Cleveland Youth Detention facility in Townsville North Queensland. The centre's population consists of male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous youth who come from a variety of remote, regional and urban locations across the north of the state. A major objective of the centre is to assist young offenders in making a successful transition into their communities through the provision of a relevant and vocationally oriented education program. One recent innovation in achieving this objective is the adoption of a mentoring program that provides individual students with a suitable role model from the community. This paper describes the philosophy of the program and how the mentoring project was adapted to meet the needs of the young people while they are in detention and when they leave Cleveland. The final component of the paper provides a discussion of a proposed research project that will evaluate the mentoring project and provide useful information for the Centre staff the mentis and the mentors in terms of its effectiveness for reducing recidivism among young offenders.

Existing mentoring programs for “at risk” youth

The process of mentoring has a variety of definitions ranging from a “humanist or socio-emotional view which elicits a maximum amount of interaction in order to develop a meaningful, supportive relationship,”(McCallum and Beltman 2002 p3); to a “close relationship between two people where a usually older, but always more experienced person... guides and assists a younger person to a level of personal and professional development” (Natters 1998 p4).

During the last decade the process of mentoring has taken on a formalised approach with strict guidelines as to the recruitment, training and supervision of mentors. (Rights of the Child UN reference). The majority of programs operate in the areas of educational institutions although programs have now been extended to various professions and universities (Frekso and Kowalsky 1998).

Additionally, mentoring programs exist in various forms for young people who are perceived as being “ at risk” in terms of making a successful transition to adulthood.

There are a number of successful mentioning programs that have been identified as assisting young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Canada it was identified that mentoring could assist youth who experienced problems associated with

criminal offending, drug abuse, family breakdown or long-term unemployment. In 1998 The Canadian Government responded by launching the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention with a budget of \$32 million annually (Manitoba Crime Prevention Initiatives Newsroom 24/04/03). Several mentor programs received funding from this Strategy, including Birdtail Sioux First Nation in Beulah, Brooklands Youth and Community Committee in Winnipeg and the Laurel Centre in Winnipeg.

In Europe *the Breaking Through Europe*, Mercerised Seminar Conference described a successful mentoring program involving the Merseyside Police and a cohort of youth who were identified as being at risk of offending. This project resulted in the development of an effective program where the students were re-engaged with an education program culminating with accreditation towards a Key Skills diploma. Additionally a program called Route-53 in Manchester achieved a 60% success rate in preventing young people from re-offending. This is one of the few programs that has an evaluation of outcomes. The major outcomes of this program are that mentors played a significant role in enhancing young people's self-esteem provided links to further education and employment pathways and assisted them to reintegrate back to their community.

In the United States there are a number of successful projects including The Mentoring-Plus Program (Dalston Youth Project, Benioff 1997). This program focused on youth within the 15-18 year age bracket who had committed at least one criminal offence. An evaluation of the program indicated that, after two years, 73% of the mentees in the program had enrolled in college, further training or employment. This corresponded with 61% of the youth desisting from further offending. (*The Bulletin*. "Investing in Youth: International Approaches to Preventing Crime and Victimization" 2001 p6). However the evaluation cautions that short-term mentoring programs which are under-resourced and which do not adequately train mentors may actually disadvantage young people (Grossman 1999, Campbell-Watley 2001, Beier 2000).

An example of a well-resourced ongoing program is the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America mentoring program which operates over 500 agencies across the USA. Many of the mentees are from at-risk groups with over 60% male, from minority groups, single-parent or low-income families and with a history of substance abuse or violence. A large-scale evaluation of the program in 1992-1993 (Tierney, Grossman and Resch 1995) compared a group of mentored young people with a group of non-mentored young people. The mentored group were: 46% less likely to start using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to begin using alcohol, 53% less likely to skip school, violent behaviour was reduced by 33%. In addition the youth who received mentoring support reported an increase in positive attitudes to school, their family and better relationships with their peers (McCallum and Beltman 2002).

In Australia, there are a number of mentoring programs for students who are at risk of offending. The National Crime Prevention Program funded several South Australian Crime Prevention Projects including the Indigenous Youth Mentoring Program. This program. (since renamed Panyappi, meaning younger brother or sister) works with young Aboriginal people who have been identified as being at risk or in the early stages of contact with the juvenile justice system. Aboriginal mentors are paid to provide positive and supportive intervention, as well as assistance and encouragement while acting as role models to the young people

In an evaluation of Australian mentoring programs such as the Panyappi program Wilczynski (2002) observed that research failed to find any conclusive evidence as to

whether mentoring reduced recidivism among young offenders. However Wilczynski argues that at a qualitative level, it appears that mentoring can make a difference in terms of reduced offending and drug use, improving self-esteem and a general increase in social functioning and capacity to form and maintain relationships with others.

In a review of Wilczynski's evaluation, Armitage (2003) argued that current evaluations concentrate too much on formal quantifiable outcomes (for example how many mentors /mentees were in the program or where referrals originated) instead of trying to measure other qualitative based outcomes such as; "what worked for whom in what context" (p.12). Armitage posited that program evaluations need to consider the context needs and composition of the target group in order to gauge the true effectiveness of their aims.

In summary, mentoring programs exist across diverse contexts and settings and appear to have some beneficial outcomes for "at risk" youth. However there is a dearth of qualitative research that focuses on what mentors and mentees perceive about the programs. In addition, there is little research in the Australian context that focuses on how mentoring operates within juvenile detention settings and how effective these programs are in terms of assisting young offenders to reintegrate back to their communities.

The mentoring program at Cleveland Detention Centre

The Cleveland Education and Training Centre is situated in the Cleveland Detention Centre in Townsville Queensland. The centre provides an education service to youth who have been detained in custody. The Youth Detention Centre is a distinctive educational context with student's communities covering the area south to Mackay, west to the Northern Territory Border, north to the Torres Straits and east to Palm Island. The centre can accommodate a maximum of thirty-two male students. Detention periods range from overnight to several years resulting in a highly mobile student population. Unfortunately a high proportion of young people return to Cleveland after re-offending. Many of these students have had a disruptive experience of schooling resulting in low levels of academic achievement, alienation from and a resistance to schooling.

Some of the contributing factors for students disengagement from formal education are: criminogenic behaviours inherent in the family, social disadvantage, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, absence or lack of educational experience in early childhood and the lack of appropriate role models for success. The challenge for the Education and Training Centre at Cleveland is to provide programs that assist in the personal and social development of the young people in addition to a vocationally oriented curriculum that assists in preparing them for specific forms of employment.

It was surmised that if a resident developed a trusting relationship with someone outside of the Centre that it was possible this relationship could continue upon the resident's release. Furthermore it was thought that the presence of a positive relationship in the young man's life would provide some of the informal but critical support needed to make a successful transition into normal community life. A mentor could therefore increase the positive networks that the young person could access in the community.

The Cleveland Mentoring Program was implemented in 2002 as part of a statewide trial to pilot mentoring programs across various educational contexts. Funding was available for the appointment of a part-time coordinator who was responsible for forming a steering committee, a strategy for advertising for voluntary mentors, training "suitable" mentors and co-ordinating weekly visits to the detention facility for mentors.

Recruitment of mentors

Mentors were recruited from the community through a variety of formal and informal advertisements such as pamphlets and community radio advertisements. Potential mentors attended an interview with panel members from the school and the local Indigenous Community. After the interview a total of twenty mentors were trained at a two day workshop aimed at assisting mentors with communication skills, gaining an awareness of Indigenous cultures and an orientation of the detention facility.

After the training workshop mentors visited Cleveland to meet with potential mentees for lunch. Over the following weeks the mentors and mentees developed rapport with each other based on mutual interests such as building and construction activities, chess and cooking. In some cases mentors had more than one mentee and visited Cleveland more than the planned weekly visit.

Initial perceptions about the program

A number of initial observations can be made about the effectiveness of the Cleveland Program. The initial support for the mentoring pilot programs has now ended meaning that the education centre must find an alternative source of ongoing funding to ensure that the coordinator's position is maintained. Despite this problem the majority of mentors continue to meet with their mentees for lunch on a weekly basis.

Anecdotal evidence reveals that the mentors look forward to visiting Cleveland and they feel that the young mentees enjoy the relationships they have developed with their role models. The major limitation of the current program is that there is no scope to pursue activities together in the community unlike other successful mentoring programs.

However there have been cases where mentors have continued their relationship with their mentee after the young person has left Cleveland which is one indicator of the resiliency and commitment of the volunteer mentors. At other times mentors have visited Cleveland to support their young mentee when they have participated in rugby matches with visiting school teams.

The greatest frustration encountered by mentors is when their mentee is released from Cleveland that often means the termination of their relationship. While the mentors acknowledge that inevitably of the young person leaving Cleveland there may be a need to consider extending the existing program to the post-release phase that may be critical if the program is to achieve its aim of reducing recidivist behaviour among the young offenders.

One of the greatest strengths of the program is the support from staff of the Education Centre as well as the Centre's Management Team, youth workers and other ancillary staff who all see the value of the youth having access to positive role models who are part of the local community.

Program evaluation

Despite the anecdotal data that suggests that the Cleveland Mentoring Program is successful no research has been conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of the program for assisting the young people to make successful transitions back to their communities. There is little data about the mentors or mentees perceptions about their participation in

the program. While the literature describes the characteristics of successful programs in the community there is no existing research in Australia that focuses on how mentoring operates as best practice for Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents within the social cultural context of youth detention facilities.

Accordingly a research proposal has been submitted to attract external funding to evaluate the effectiveness of this program. The research will consist of a partnership between Education Queensland, Department of Families and James Cook University. The proposed pilot study has the following aims:

- a. To gain the perceptions of young people who are in detention about how mentoring has prepared them to make successful transitions back to their communities.
- b. To gain the perceptions of the volunteer mentors about the challenges and successes they have encountered by working in a mentoring program within the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre.
- c. To allow the school principal, the program coordinator and the Centre's manager to reflect on the impact of the program on the other spheres of the residents life in the Centre such as their attitude to education, their relationships to other residents and staff within the Centre.

Perceived outcomes of the research

It is anticipated that a number of concrete outcomes will result from the initiation of this pilot study.

- a. The outcomes of the research will lead to the development of a large-scale longitudinal study to gauge whether mentoring reduces recidivism among young offenders. The study will focus on a cohort of youth when they are in the Cleveland program as well as their continuing relationship with their mentors for the three years post-release.
- b. To add to the body of research on mentoring at risk students as it relates to specific social contexts such as juvenile detention settings.
- c. The existing model of mentoring is based on an individualistic one on one relationship. This research may assist in gaining increased understandings as to whether this approach is effective for Indigenous youth who may respond better to other frameworks such as collectivity as opposed to individuality.
- d. To persuade and demonstrate to Government and other funding agencies the importance of developing appropriate resources and funds to cultivate relevant evaluation frameworks for mentoring within specific contexts such as youth detention facilities.

Conclusions

The Cleveland Mentoring Program is unique in terms of its social- cultural context and philosophy in attempting to reduce the current high rates of young people who re-offend. The mentor-mentee relationships continue with increasing numbers of new residents

wanting to be involved in the program. Additionally the program has the support of staff within the education centre as well as the management staff of the centre.

However the program faces new challenges as it enters its next phase. The issue of continued funding for the coordinator is paramount considering the high degree of co-ordination involved within a detention centre. As the program evolves there may be the need to consider training another cohort of mentors including a greater representation of Indigenous community representatives.

The proposed research has the potential to provide valuable data as to whether the program is obtaining its primary objectives and what else is required to ensure that young offenders make successful transitions back to their communities. Furthermore the research has the potential to assist in providing other frameworks of mentoring for students from Indigenous backgrounds whom are in detention. Finally consideration may be given to extending the current program so that mentoring relationships continue after a young person is released from detention.

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