Youth Mentoring

A good thing?

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EDITORIAL NOTE

All names of mentors and mentees have been changed to ensure the anonymity of interviews.

SUMMARY

- Mentoring has been defined as a one-to-one, non-judgemental relationship in which an individual voluntarily gives time to support and encourage another.
- The Government is strongly supportive of mentoring and has stated its belief that mentoring can help to deliver some of the ambitious aims stated in its 'Every Child Matters' agenda.
- Youth mentoring has experienced exponential growth in the UK over the last decade and is typically used to help young people who are thought to be socially excluded, are involved in the criminal justice system or are not in employment, education or training. There are now 3,500 programmes running mentoring schemes in the UK (a large proportion of which are youth mentoring programmes).
- The Government, the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (the 'strategic body' which supervises mentoring) and the organisations which provide mentoring make many claims for its efficacy. However, the evidence base that mentoring benefits vulnerable youths is poor: concerns have been raised by academics about the gulf between political enthusiasm for mentoring and the research evidence to support it.

- Mentors usually work with vulnerable youths (many of whom will have suffered from poor parenting). Yet mentors and their managers only require minimal qualifications and have little training and support to help them understand and cope with the challenging behaviour of mentees.

- The Government gives its blessing to mentoring schemes which are managed by staff with minimal training who themselves are charged with managing substantial numbers of barely trained volunteers. This is not appropriate for schemes which are working with particularly troubled youths.

- Good mentoring can work for some young people. In particular, mentoring appears to work best when it replicates the role of a parent in providing consistent and continuous support.

- There is, however, no evidence that it works for all young people (particularly the most disadvantaged).

- The Government, the MBF and individual mentoring organisations should stop claiming that mentoring is some kind of panacea for disaffected youth.

- Mentoring should be recognised as a highly skilled, specific form of intervention for troubled youths. It should be far more tightly focused on those youths for whom it can work, more rigorously controlled and more carefully monitored.

- Mentoring in the UK is in need of a fundamental rethink.

FOREWORD

Surely mentoring schemes for young people *must* be a good thing? The idea of offering a troubled or struggling child or teenager a good role model and one to one time with a sympathetic adult seems an attractive proposition. It also appears to be an inexpensive solution to some of Britain's deep-rooted social problems – not least teenage crime, broken families, educational underachievement and flat-lining social mobility.

The UK has the highest incidence of father-absent households in Europe. It has a very low (and falling) proportion of male teachers in primary schools. Large numbers of children, particularly boys, lack role models both at home and in the classroom. As concern over gun and knife crime grows – 25 teenagers murdered in London alone by September this year - the pressure on Ministers to 'do something' is strong.

During his time as Chancellor, Gordon Brown made much of the potential of mentoring to deal with gang violence.[1] More recently

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[1] See, for example, the Pre-Budget Report statement 6 December 2006 and the speech by Gordon Brown to the Donald Dewar Memorial Lecture, 12 October 2006.

the Cabinet Office Minister Phil Hope told a conference that "Every single government department is using mentoring in some way to achieve their objectives."[2]

Yet Richard Meier's report shows how politicians have reached for an off-the-shelf, poorly defined concept, co-opted it into their national strategies and allowed their rhetoric to outstrip the reality of what it can achieve. In this sense, the report provides a case study in why this Government has failed to get to grips with social breakdown after more than ten years of record spending and new initiatives.

Ironically, the Government's own Social Exclusion Unit summed up the situation when it concluded that:[3]

> 'Despite widespread support for mentoring and peer mentoring programmes, the evidence base… is very patchy and inconclusive.'

Richard Meier's report makes clear that when done well (with consistent, long-term commitment from suitable mentors), high quality mentoring can be an effective tool for some specific groups of troubled youths. It is not, however, a straightforward panacea for the problems experienced by young people. It can also be harmful when it is badly handled or when the mentoring relationship breaks down or is abandoned.

The evidence in the pamphlet shows that mentoring generally works best when it replicates the role of a parent in providing regular, consistent and continuing support over a long period.

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2 Quoted by the Chief Executive of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) in an interview with ePolitix.com, 27 June 2008

3 K Philip & J Spratt, *A synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending,* MBF, 2007.

That should tell us that the need to strengthen families must be at the heart of the policy response to Britain's social problems.

In my 2006 report for the Centre for Policy Studies,[4] I catalogued the extent and scope of government intervention in children's lives, which has undermined parental responsibility and extended the authority of the state, a trend which has continued unabated since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister. Using Government schemes to introduce mentors of variable quality into the lives of thousands of troubled young people is another manifestation of this trend.

Unless and until the Government recognises the importance of families, incentivises marriage and fatherhood, and encourages parental responsibility, then mentoring schemes will represent at best a sticking plaster, and at worst another broken relationship.

Jill Kirby
Director
Centre for Policy Studies
September 2008

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4 *The Nationalisation of Childhood*, CPS, 2006.

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth mentoring has experienced exponential growth in the UK over the last decade. It is now commonly employed as a way of helping young people who are thought to be socially excluded, involved in the criminal justice system (or thought to be at risk of becoming so), or are 'not in employment, education or training' (the so-called 'Neets'). Concerns have been raised within the academic community, however, about the gulf between political enthusiasm for this practice and the research evidence to support it.

Youth mentoring originated in the US and now has a long history; the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America scheme for example – an amalgamation of two organisations which both began by recruiting adult volunteers to help boys and girls who were involved in the court system – has been running for over a century. Indeed, it was an evaluation of this scheme[5] (which found that young people with mentors showed lower levels of substance use and initiation, less physical aggression, more positive parent and peer relationships, and higher scholastic competence, attendance, and educational achievement than

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[5] J P Grossman and J P Tierney, "Does mentoring work? An impact study of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program", *Evaluation Review*, 1998.

those without) that is widely credited with kick-starting the expansion of youth mentoring in the UK over the past decade.

Researchers and academics have long argued that the concept of mentoring is poorly defined. With that in mind, a reasonable place to start a discussion about youth mentoring in the UK is the website of the national strategic body which oversees on behalf of the Government the provision of voluntary sector mentoring and befriending schemes, the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF). The MBF uses a definition from the Active Community Unit, the branch of the Home Office which supports the Foundation:[6]

> 'Mentoring is a one-to-one, non-judgemental relationship in which an individual voluntarily gives time to support and encourage another. This is typically developed at a time of transition in the mentee's life, and lasts for a significant and sustained period of time.'

The MBF is a registered charity that is called a 'strategic partner' of the Cabinet Office's Office of the Third Sector. Funded by the Home Office, the DCFS and the Cabinet Office, it states that its top priority (or 'Priority 1') is 'influencing national policy/practice'.[7]

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[6] See www.mandbf.org.uk/about/definitions/

[7] MBF, Financial Statements, 2007. This document also reveals the MBF's close relationship with the Government. For example, it states that:

> 'MBF regional coordinators and local mentoring and befriending programmes took part in the joint Treasury and Office of the Third Sector Comprehensive Spending Review: Review of the future role of the Third Sector in social and economic regeneration attending a number of road show events held around the country. MBF also responded separately to the review with a detailed written submission. At the request of the OTS, MBF agreed to set up an inter-departmental forum for government departments to share information and views. An initial

The MBF estimates that there are currently around 3,500 schemes in existence in the UK, a large proportion of which fall under the category of youth mentoring.

Mentoring as Government policy

Since the publication of the Government Green Paper *Every Child Matters* in 2003, the Every Child Matters agenda has attempted to provide an over-arching Government strategy for the well-being of all children and young people from birth to the age of 19. The agenda's aim is:

> 'For every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:
>
> - Be healthy
> - Stay safe
> - Enjoy and achieve
> - Make a positive contribution
> - Achieve economic well-being.'

Bold measures are envisaged in order to achieve these laudable if extraordinarily ambitious aims:[8]

> 'The organisations involved with providing services to children – from hospitals and schools, to police and voluntary groups – will be teaming up in new ways, sharing information and working together, to

meeting was held with representatives of the Treasury, Cabinet Office, Home Office, DfES and DCMS on 16 February 2007 to consider the focus of the proposed Forum.'

8 DfES, *Every Child Matters: aims and outcomes*, 2003.

> protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life.'

The Government makes plain its enthusiasm for mentoring and its desire that it be a mechanism for achieving its policy objectives. For example, in 2005 the Treasury published *Support for Parents: the Best Start for Children* in which it stated that:[9]

> 'The Government believes that volunteers taking the opportunity to mentor another person can promote greater opportunities for mentees and, by linking people of different ages, cultures and ethnicities, can strengthen local communities. Working with the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, the Government will continue to develop an evidence base on the impact of mentoring and to establish where mentoring can promote positive outcomes across Government objectives.'

The Government's belief in the efficacy of mentoring, and its desire to develop the evidence base to support that belief, are no doubt well-intentioned. However, as this paper explores, there is plenty of academic research which calls into question whether mentoring is compatible with the fine-sounding intentions of the Every Child Matters agenda.

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9 See www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/news/?asset=News&id=35130)

2. WHEN MENTORING WORKS – A CASE STUDY

There is no doubt that youth mentoring – when done well – can be beneficial to young people. There are clear messages about what works, just as there are about what does not work.

One young person who has clearly benefited from a structured and serious-minded approach by a mentoring scheme is Barbara, a 16-year old interviewed for this report.

Barbara was offered the chance of having a volunteer mentor by her secondary school (which had links with a mentoring provider). It was suggested to her that her behavioural issues – such as the way she interacted with teachers, for example the tone of voice she used when addressing them – might benefit from the help of a mentor. Although initially resistant to the idea, Barbara felt encouraged by the attitude of the mentor when she first met her. As the mentoring scheme was not compulsory, Barbara felt she had some control over the process from the outset.

Barbara was pleasantly surprised to discover that her mentor was able to help her deal more appropriately with her teachers by showing her different, and more effective, ways of speaking

and relating to those in authority at the school. Her mentor was very welcoming, Barbara commented. 'She made me feel comfortable', she continued; 'I could talk to her if I had a problem'. Barbara also mentioned that her mentor seemed able to cope with her anger, and would give her time when she needed it 'to calm down'.

Barbara was able to see mentor once a week, at a set time, but was also offered the chance to have further meetings if she needed them. Her mentor informed her at the outset that the scheme would last a year, although there was an option of lengthening it if both Barbara and her mentor felt that it would be beneficial. One of the aspects of the mentoring scheme which Barbara clearly welcomed was the fact that 'the door was still open' to her, even after she did indeed leave the scheme at the end of the year. This seemed to be of great solace to Barbara.

Barbara's family was also involved in the scheme from the start, the mentoring scheme having written to them before the meetings began to explain what mentoring was all about and to invite them to contact the scheme if they would like to find out more. Barbara was clear about its benefits:

> 'Mentoring helped me through my school years. It helped me become a better person by learning how to speak to adults. It built me up for the real world. It also helped me speak about my problems rather than me keeping them inside me or taking out all the stress and anger on innocent people.'

There are a number of facets of Barbara's experience which chime with what the research evidence indicates makes for effective mentoring. But Barbara was fortunate. Many schemes are much less effective – in large part because of the failings of the system under which mentoring operates in this country.

3. RESEARCH ON MENTORING

Government and industry claims for mentoring

In a speech to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in 2004, Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, said:

> 'Mentoring is an approach that is being adopted everywhere from schools to the career service to the workplace, and for everyone from looked-after children, to new entrepreneurs, to the long-term unemployed, and from gifted children to under-achievers. In one programme for young people at risk in the United States, those befriended or mentored were 46% less likely than others to use drugs and 27% less likely to use alcohol.'

Such selective use of research is indicative of a worrying lack of rigour. And its conclusions do not accurately reflect the academic evidence.

A more recent statement by Gordon Brown sounded slightly less gung-ho. In April 2008, he praised Nottingham for becoming the UK's first Early Intervention City, one of the elements of which is a new mentoring scheme for young people. The Prime Minister declared that this 'will enable young people at risk of becoming

involved in serious crime, being offered the chance to work with a positive mentor to build a better life'.

Not surprisingly, mentoring is deemed to be a good thing by the industry itself. As the MBF proclaims:[10]

> 'The last ten years has seen a major growth in the use of mentoring and befriending as a vehicle for social change. The present Government has itself recognised their importance as a means of achieving its own policy objectives; for raising educational attainment; tackling crime and anti-social behaviour; addressing isolation in the community; and promoting active citizenship.'

These assumptions about the efficacy of mentoring are widespread. Every month those schemes which have been awarded the MBF's 'Approved Provider Standard' are listed on the MBF's website. In May 2008, for example, one of those listed was SOVA's Mentoring Scheme in Sheffield. SOVA (Supporting Others through Volunteer Action) makes the following bold statement about the effects of mentoring on young people:[11]

> 'Young people with a mentor benefit in a number of ways, including:
>
> - increased self-esteem
> - motivation
> - improved employability

[10] Mentoring and Befriending Foundation's Approved Provider Status Guidance Notes. See www.mandbf.org.uk/goodpractice/aps/

[11] SOVA claims to be the leading national volunteer mentoring organisation working in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales. See www.sova.org.uk/service.php?value=MentoringAndBefriending

- enhanced social and life skills
- access to additional opportunities
- a positive role model.'

The research base

The claims made by SOVA (as well as the similar claims made by the MBF and the Government) for the supposed benefits of mentoring programmes are not uncommon. Yet such claims are irreconcilable with the academic evaluation of mentoring schemes.

Even the MBF seems to be aware of the limited value of mentoring. In July 2007, it published a synthesis of the available research on mentoring and befriending on its website.[12] It concluded that:

> 'Research evidence about the value of the intervention [mentoring] has been at best mixed.'

This statement echoes one from the Social Exclusion Unit in 2005:[13]

> 'The evidence base for mentoring is very patchy and inconclusive.'

It is certainly to the MBF's credit that it has published this independent research, given how equivocal its findings are. But it is nonetheless alarming that this research (and many others) is at odds with the current mentoring system which the MBF itself oversees.

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[12] K Philip and J Spratt, *A synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending*, BMF, 2007.

[13] Social Exclusion Unit, *Transitions: a Social Exclusion Unit Final Report on Young Adults with Complex Needs*, 2005.

For example, the findings of the largest and most authoritative study of mentoring schemes yet undertaken were published in 2002. The authors, David DuBois and Jean Rhodes, stated that:[14]

> 'We used meta-analysis to review 55 evaluations of the effects of mentoring programs on youth. Overall, findings provide evidence of only a modest or small benefit of program participation for the average.'

They went on:[15]

> 'Program effects [only] are enhanced significantly when greater numbers of both theory-based and empirically-based best practices are utilized and when strong relationships are formed between mentors and youth.'

David DuBois commented in a later paper:[16]

> 'There have been numerous initiatives to tailor mentoring programs to serve the needs of particular populations of youth better. These populations include youth in foster care, academically at-risk students, youth who have a parent who is incarcerated, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth who have disabilities, and pregnant and parenting adolescents. To date, very little research has been conducted either to

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14 D L DuBois, B E Holloway, J C Valentine et al, 'Effectiveness of mentoring programmes for youth: a meta-analytic review,' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2002.

15 Ibid.

16 D L DuBois and J E Rhodes, 'Introduction to the special issue: Youth mentoring: Bridging science with practice', *Journal of Community Psychology*, November 2006.

> inform these newer approaches to youth mentoring or to evaluate their effectiveness.'

Other recent research on mentoring schemes underlines these concerns. Professor Ian St James-Roberts of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, the author of a study commissioned by the Youth Justice Board into its 80 mentoring schemes, commented:[17]

> 'The results were more than slightly disheartening... Our failure to find evidence of improvements in behaviour, literacy and numeracy raises doubts as to whether [mentoring makes] a significant, lasting difference.'

Interestingly this study also found that:[18]

> 'The anticipated chief advantage of mentoring programmes – low cost – has not been realised, since most mentoring programmes proved to be more expensive than alternatives that produce similar benefits.'

In reference to mentoring for young offenders, the MBF's own synthesis of evidence reported that:[19]

> 'It may be the case that mentoring programmes are not suitable for certain groups of young people.'

And yet the mentoring show goes on.

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17 I St James-Roberts, *Mentoring schemes 2001-2004.* Available from www.yjb.gov.uk/Publications/Scripts/prodView.asp?idProduct=278&eP=

18 Ibid.

19 K Philip and J Spratt, op. cit.

4. THE APPROVED PROVIDER STANDARD

The Approved Provider Standard is, according to the MBF:[20]

> 'A national benchmark for organisations providing one-to-one, volunteer mentoring or befriending. It is a national award supported by the Cabinet Office and Department for Children, Schools and Families and aims to provide programmes with a badge of competence and safe practice in mentoring or befriending.'

Launched in 2001, and administered by the MBF, the Approved Provider Status:

> '...provides a realistic and credible basis for assessing core practice. The assessment framework is focused on the key management and operational areas that underpin the effectiveness of any mentoring project.'

On the face of it, this sounds like a serious and robust assessment tool. But do the stipulations of the Approved

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20 See www.mandbf.org.uk/goodpractice/aps/

Provider Standard marry up with what the research evidence says about effective practice?

Sadly, the Approved Provider Standard (APS) assessment process is, in the words of the MBF, 'primarily a "desk-top" exercise'.[21] This means that only rarely will a mentoring scheme be visited and assessed in person. In the majority of cases, an intervention which the Government and others claim can have a significant effect on the lives of young people, and during which non-professional, inexperienced adults are allowed to spend large amounts of time unsupervised with troubled young people, is regulated simply through a form-filling exercise.

What does the Approved Provider Standard cover?

The application form for the APS asks providers to state the purpose of their project. In its guidance notes, the MBF states that it 'will be looking for a link between the broad subject aims and the specific outcomes or benefits'. But since the MBF states that 'Mentoring tends to have a stronger emphasis [than befriending] on goal-setting and time limited work and less on the development of a social relationship', any approved mentoring scheme must necessarily adopt the MBF's definition of mentoring. This is despite the fact that the MBF's emphasis on goal-setting may even be detrimental to some mentoring relationships. In this way, the goal-setting/directive aspect of mentoring is favoured over other, arguably equally important, aspects of the relationship. For example, a publication from the Government's Social Exclusion Unit, *Young Adults with troubled lives: summary of questionnaire responses,* found that it was as important to build self-esteem and 'soft skills' as to gain qualifications.[22] Such simple, interactive skills – the ability to get

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Social Exclusion Unit, *Young adults with troubled lives: summary of questionnaire responses*, 2005.

to work on time, to be able to take directions from people in charge, for example – are central to the ability to develop and maintain benign and productive relationships with other people. Since it is extremely difficult to progress in life without these aptitudes, they may be the area of functioning which mentoring is best suited to help with.

Helen Colley's research on mentoring in the UK demonstrates this point.[23] Interviewing mentors at the mentoring scheme New Beginnings (a UK scheme involving intensive individual mentoring support for 16 to 19 year olds not in structured education and training), Colley discovered that:

> 'One of the first things that mentors learned was that, without exception, the young people resisted employment and training outcomes as the focus of their mentoring relationship. Some sought support for mental health problems or a difficult pregnancy. Others saw mentoring as a space to relax, escape the pressures of their lives, have fun, and get some unconditional attention from an adult.'

This illustrates how mentoring schemes and young people inevitably have different agendas. While some mentors 'began by following the scheme guidelines [they] soon perceived a clash between these and their mentee's concerns, deciding to prioritise the latter'. Colley illustrates this point by referring to the experience of one of the mentors she interviewed.

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23 H Colley, 'Learning Experiences of Adults Mentoring Socially Excluded Young People: Issues of Power and Gender', Paper presented to the joint conference of the *Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education,* University of Victoria, British Columbia, 2004.

> 'Jane realised that her mentee, Annette, was using their sessions to discuss her bereavement of her mother and seek reassurance about her pregnancy. She checked the guidelines in the mentors' handbook, and as a result asked to see Annette's training plan for the following week. Annette seemed shocked and annoyed by this request, and brought her maternity clinic planner every week instead – a graphic symbol of resistance which convinced Jane to change direction.'

Quite why Annette was deemed suitable for this kind of scheme is a moot point, as does whether it is reasonable to expect a briefly-trained, non-professional volunteer to be able to help, and cope with, the emotional demands which this kind of relationship must have placed on her.

The difficulty of being a mentor is strikingly demonstrated by the views of some of the other mentors Colley interviewed. 'What is a mentor?', one of the mentors commented:

> 'Sometimes I think I'm just a verbal punch-bag, and that's what I'm there for. My mentee can come in and say: "The whole world's shite and I don't want to do it", and just get it off her chest'.

'Intense distress' such as this was, according to Colley, 'evident in most' of the mentors' interviews.

Goal orientated/relationship mentoring: a case study

The case study of Samantha, a young woman interviewed for this paper, illustrates how unhelpful it can be to maintain such a split between the goal-orientated aspect of mentoring and the relationship-focused aspect of befriending.

Samantha had been involved in two separate mentoring schemes, one organised through her university, and one through her jobcentre. Both had been set up with the sole aim of helping people find employment in the media industry. Samantha, an articulate and reflective woman, felt that both of her mentors had focused exclusively on basic, practical aspects of getting work in the media industry, such as writing covering letters and revising her CV. Both mentoring schemes had, she felt, offered much in their publicity, but failed to match up to these claims in reality.

The media industry is notorious for being difficult to break into; and yet, when Samantha did indeed find that she was having difficulty finding a position, neither of her mentors showed any commitment to her; in fact, Samantha found herself in the position of chasing her mentors to arrange meetings.

It is clearly sensible for any mentoring schemes to have goals. But it is not enough in itself: if those goals are difficult to achieve, then mentees are likely to need something more than practical expertise from their mentors. Staying power, commitment, the ability to provide encouragement in the face of knock-backs and disappointments – these are the qualities which surely any self-respecting mentoring scheme should be offering mentees as a minimum? Yet Samantha's experience of mentoring has left her disheartened by the process:

> 'I wanted someone to help give me extra drive when I felt disillusioned… They could have offered me some emotional support; instead the mentors just kept going over stuff – like CVs and covering letters – that I was already doing…
>
> I think mentoring can be useful for some people, but mainly I think it's about the Government making

> themselves look good rather than really helping young people.'

Astonishingly, in neither of the mentoring schemes did the managers or co-ordinators follow up on Samantha when the mentoring relationships broke down (in the first instance after two months, in the second after five months). This is one of the most worrying aspects about mentoring schemes. Analysing data from the national Big Brothers Big Sisters study in the US, researchers found that the effects of mentor relationships varied with their duration.[24] Young people who were in mentoring relationships that terminated within the first three months experienced significantly larger drops in feelings of self-worth and lower perceived scholastic competence than young people who did not receive any mentoring at all. On the other hand, young people who were in matches that lasted more than 12 months reported much higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance, and scholastic competence than the control subjects.

Samantha comes across as a resourceful and well-balanced person and, although she maintained that she did not feel that her mentoring experience had harmed her significantly, it is surely wrong that she had had such a disappointing experience. For young people with less self-esteem than Samantha, the consequences of similarly poor experiences of mentoring could be severe.

Since the risks are so high for young people being involved in mentoring relationships which terminate within the first three months, it must surely be incumbent on mentoring schemes to ensure that the likelihood of relationships breaking down in the

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24 J B Grossman and J E Rhodes, 'The test of time: predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring programs,' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2002.

initial stages is reduced to a minimum. Yet, despite these clear research findings, at no point in its guidance notes does the APS state that it requires monitoring and evaluation of mentees whose mentoring relationship fails.

The MBF's Review of the APS

The APS is now under review, with the MBF due to report its conclusions in October. Worryingly, in many aspects, the MBF seems to be preparing the ground for an even weaker system of inspection and monitoring than already exists.

The document which sets out the terms of this review does seem to recognise some of the problems with the existing APS. As it says:[25]

> 'Some projects have just started out and want to achieve the minimum requirements whilst other projects want to be recognised as providing best practice'.

It suggests the following possible response to this problem:

> 'Another solution would be to separate out the fifth area, Monitoring and Evaluation, from the other four key areas of the standard as this tends to be an area where many projects struggle to achieve to the standard. Again, this would create a two-tier system with the minimum benchmark standard being separated out from the best practice level.'

This seems an extraordinary proposal; surely the monitoring and evaluation of the service should be central to an effective mentoring scheme. Is the MBF seriously suggesting that because some mentoring schemes fail to achieve the APS

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25 MBF, *Approved Provider Standard – Scope for Review*, 2008.

because their monitoring and evaluation procedures are either not in place or not robust enough that they should nevertheless be granted a first level of state approval? The APS may be flawed in a number of respects, but making it even laxer is not going to be helpful.

Another sign that the review may relax further the APS is the suggestion that:

> 'Feedback from programmes would suggest that a ten-question or ten-step approach would make the process more appealing and feel more manageable.'

Again, the MBF appears to be suggesting that the APS should be made easier to achieve. Considering the fact that the APS is designed to give a stamp of approval to schemes which are intended to help some of the most damaged and vulnerable children in our society, the APS should surely be made more, not less, stringent.

The APS Scope for Review also states that:

> 'The main reason the APS assessment process has remained a "desk-top" exercise is due to the limitations of cost.'

This is a worrying admission. The implication is that the MBF is happy to continue a weak and arguably dangerous system of inspection on the grounds of cost control. This does not, of course, sit happily with the bold statements made by the Government in *Every Child Matters.*

5. THE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE OF MENTORING SCHEME MANAGERS

Applicants for the Approved Provider Standard are asked to provide evidence 'which shows that project manager/workers have the necessary experience/background and have received appropriate training to carry out their roles successfully'. It does not however state what kinds or levels of experience and training are deemed necessary to carry out this kind of work.

At the time of writing, Kent Mentoring Service, run by Rainer, were advertising for a Mentoring Co-ordinator. On their website, Rainer Kent Mentoring Service states that it is 'a National Mentoring and Befriending Foundation approved provider of mentoring services' (i.e. it has achieved the Approved Provider Standard) and that – rather meaninglessly – it has been 'recognised by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation as being "beyond excellence" and have been part of their national consultation for established mentoring service'.

The role with Rainer includes responsibility for 'Support[ing] volunteers through every aspect of the mentoring relationship' and 'support[ing] volunteers and young people to participate in group work activities'. Yet the job specification for this post only requires candidates to have '5 GCSEs or equivalent grade A-C

(must include English Language)' while a 'relevant professional qualification such as Social Work, Social Science, Psychology, Teaching and/or Youth Work' is merely a 'desirable' criterion (and what is it about being a social scientist, one might wonder, that would equip one for the demands of being a mentor co-ordinator?). The 'experience of supervision to reflect on own and others practice' is an essential criteria for candidates. Yet there is no need for candidates to have had any recognised training in counselling, psychotherapy or groupwork/group facilitation.

All these fairly obvious shortfalls in the recruitment process are for an organisation which claims to have reached a 'beyond excellent' standard. And the successful candidates will be employed to supervise mentors (individually and in groups) who themselves are required to have no particular qualifications and who will have only had a brief training course during which to 'reflect' on their own backgrounds, attitudes and assumptions.

Indeed, it may well be that not requiring adequate training and experience for the role of mentoring co-ordinators is common across the sector. For example, when Leeds Youth Offending Service recruited a mentoring co-ordinator to 'provide individual supervision to all mentors on a regular basis to review workload, availability, training needs and any changing circumstances', the job specification stated that:

> 'No specific qualification is essential for this post, but education to degree level, evidence of appropriate training and the possession of a professional qualification is highly desirable'.

Bad mentoring: a case study

The skills and experience the manager of the mentoring scheme which Ben, a 15 year old boy met while researching this paper are not known. It may be that the fault for the breakdown in the

relationship lay solely with the mentor's failure to follow standard practice; however, it may also have been the case that policies and procedures were never properly spelt out to the mentors.

Ben – an articulate and intelligent boy – was compulsorily required to attend a mentoring scheme, for two hours a week during school hours (he was annoyed that he missed lessons because of it). The scheme was arranged through his local Connexions service, and his referral was due to 'anger management' issues. Ben said that 20 children from his year were chosen for one-to-one mentoring under the scheme which was supposed to last a year. 'It made me feel like a bad kid', Ben told me; 'I didn't feel I was a bad kid. There were much worse kids not on the programme'. Ben talked in general terms about the difficulties there had been at home at that time in his life, particularly 'marital problems' between his mother and his 'brother's father'. 'I was an angry child', Ben commented.

At the start of the mentoring relationship, Ben's mentor (a middle-aged woman) told him 'It's between you and me', so giving Ben an assurance that what he spoke about would remain confidential between them. However, when Ben told his mentor about his home difficulties, he then found out that his mentor had told her manager. Ben said that her action 'broke the trust' between him and his mentor. 'I let her know I'd lost all trust in her'. His mentor replied that because of the seriousness of what Ben had told her, she had no option but to tell her manager. On the face of it this seems to be a case of very poor practice on the part of the mentoring scheme. It should surely be a *sine qua non* of standard practice that mentors talk openly with their mentees about the whole issue of confidentiality – including where its limits are. For a practice which essentially aims at fostering healthy, trusting relationships between adults and vulnerable young people, failure to do this is negligent.

The experience left Ben feeling bitter; when he started the mentoring scheme, Ben had a lot of issues that he was struggling with, and had nowhere to turn with them. ‘My mum had a lot on her mind – I didn’t want to start stressing her out with my stuff.’

It is a pity that such poor conduct on behalf of the mentor and the mentoring scheme resulted in the breakdown of what could have been a beneficial relationship. As Ben put it, ‘the quality of the mentors is really important; it could make you potentially worse.’

6. THE RECRUITMENT OF MENTORS

The Government believes that young people who are failing academically, are involved in crime or anti-social behaviour and are socially excluded can be helped by mentoring. These young people are, it should go without saying, not an easy group to help, given the emotional and behavioural issues which many, if not all, will bring with them to a fledgling relationship with an adult stranger.

Indeed, the difficulties which some mentees would be struggling with would provide a challenge even for highly-qualified and experienced professionals. And yet the Government gives its blessing to mentoring schemes which are managed by staff with minimal training who themselves are charged with managing substantial numbers of barely trained volunteers. How this squares with the stated requirement in the Guidance Notes to the APS that managers and workers should 'have the necessary experience/background and have received appropriate training to carry out their roles successfully' is a mystery.

Mentors are usually volunteers, drawn from all sections of the community. They are not generally required to have any special experience. They can come to mentoring with a range of (largely unexamined) assumptions and expectations and will

have volunteered for a variety of reasons, only some of which will be helpful to the young people to whom they are assigned.

For example, some will volunteer with the (perhaps unconscious) hope of being able to rescue (from crime, unemployment, hopelessness) the young person to whom they are assigned. They may have this ambition because they wanted once (or still want) to be rescued from something themselves. A mentor who holds such a belief is likely to become disillusioned if they fail in their attempts to 'rescue' the mentee. Their training should therefore equip them to bear very painful feelings of failure and disappointment in the event that all their good efforts seem to come to nothing.

Mentors also need to be committed to stay with the mentee for long enough to help the mentee feel understood and secure about his or her idea of the mentor. It is not uncommon for a mentor to have to put up with a good deal of aggression, non-attendance by the mentee and even open mockery. The mentoring relationship is not always smooth or without conflict. Saddling mentors with a barely trained mentoring co-ordinator or supervisor is unlikely to be beneficial for the mentees.

Equally managers themselves are too often poorly-equipped to handle (or 'contain', in psychotherapeutic terminology) the anxieties and strains of a non-professional and relatively inexperienced group of volunteers.

The APS states that applicants 'should demonstrate that an appropriate and robust recruitment and selection process is in place'. Nowhere in the guidance however does it state what exactly the criteria for selecting mentors should be. This seems strange since the research evidence, particularly the DuBois study, demonstrates that some mentor characteristics are associated with successful mentoring.

For example, schemes which recruit people who have already had experience of, and success in, helping roles are more likely to build positive relationships with mentees.[26] According to this research, a substantial proportion of people who fell into this category were teachers or other school staff, or undergraduate students reading subjects related to helping, such as psychology, education, or social work.

This is probably because people with this kind of background are more accustomed than the general population to thinking about, and reflecting upon, the experience of others; they may also have a greater degree of insight about their own attitudes than the general public as a whole. They may in addition be better able to listen to the anxieties of the people they are dealing with, and be able to tolerate the difficult feelings aroused in them by their mentees.

Recruitment of mentors from the pool of adults who have previous experience and success in helping roles would dramatically change the profile of potential mentors; such a step would begin to take seriously the positive impact which mentoring can have on young people. After all, why should adults who have no prior experience of successfully helping someone be allowed to enter into quasi-therapeutic relationships with vulnerable young people?

When a mentor fails: a case study

Ingrid, a 21 year old woman met during the research for this paper, demonstrates all too vividly some of the problems that can occur when a mentor simply isn't up to the job. At the age

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[26] D L DuBois, B E Holloway, J C Valentine et al, 'Effectiveness of mentoring programmes for youth: a meta-analytic review,' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2002.

of 16, and pregnant, Ingrid was referred to a youth centre service run by her local council. There she was given a 20 year old mentor (yes, 20), herself a young woman with a child (perhaps this made them, in the view of the mentoring scheme co-ordinator/manager, a suitable match). When Ingrid was asked what she had hoped to get out of being mentored, she replied: 'Somebody to represent me. To sort me out. Support. Just support. Guidance'.

Initially Ingrid took to her mentor; soon however she realised that her mentor 'wanted to be my friend'. In fact, this mentor (who was employed by the youth centre service as opposed to being a volunteer) began to launch into her life story and telling Ingrid all her problems; she even invited her round to her flat whereupon she openly smoked marijuana in front of her. 'She needed a mentor herself', Ingrid commented; 'she began to tell me about abuse she had experienced as a child'. Ingrid soon felt that she became someone who was supporting her mentor; they began to socialise together, her mentor often laughing in front of other people that '*I'm* supposed to be *her* mentor'.

This spectacular lack of professionalism was compounded when almost the sole boundary remaining between the pair of them was broken when the mentor began to tell her colleagues about Ingrid's personal difficulties; it was at this point that Ingrid ended the mentoring relationship. Although given the opportunity to make a formal complaint against the mentor by the scheme, Ingrid chose not to; the fact that, Ingrid said, 'they didn't apologise – they blamed me for becoming her friend' probably influenced her decision not to take matters further.

In addition, she was not offered any follow-up or the opportunity to be mentored by another person. 'They're just a joke', Ingrid said angrily.

> ‘It seems like anyone can become a mentor. They’re not setting the right example’.

Something had clearly gone wrong with this scheme, with both its recruitment process, with its *modus operandi* and with its management.

This might be something of an isolated example. But there is no reason to be confident that it is. Yet this is surely one of the most important, and potentially harmful aspects, of ineffective mentoring. As the synthesis of research on the MBF website cautions:[27]

> ‘Difficulties in recruiting and retaining mentors/befrienders are highly significant for vulnerable young people who have had to deal with high numbers of professionals and others moving in and out of their lives and who may be resistant to yet another adult promising to provide support and moving on within a short timescale. **The potential for harmful relationships exists and this needs to be more carefully examined in this as in other forms of intervention.**’ (author’s emphasis).

The reality of being a mentor

Applicants for the APS are required to submit examples of ‘promotional literature that is clear, accessible and appeals to a diverse audience’. There do not, however, appear to be any requirements for such literature to paint a realistic picture of the strains and demands which the mentoring relationship can result in.

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27 K Philip and J Spratt, op. cit.

Mentoring organisations sometimes seem to downplay this aspect of the intervention, presumably for fear of putting off potential volunteers. As one of the leading researchers in this field, Jean Rhodes, points out:[28]

> 'Even the most dedicated mentors are likely to feel exasperation, ambivalence, anger and regret at various points… If mentors were told that the road to establishing this connection [between mentor and mentee] could be a tough one – that the adolescents might very well spend the first six months testing them before offering even a shred of appreciation or authentic disclosure – many people would probably examine their motivations and commitment more carefully before volunteering.'

One of the most important reasons for mentoring schemes being open about exactly what is required of mentors is that a fundamental capacity which mentors need to have is that of resilience or robustness. That is probably why previous experience of success in a helping role is so crucial. Plenty of people, after all, have experience of trying to help. The experience of sticking with something – through thick and thin, until it is successful – is a different matter entirely.

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[28] J E Rhodes, *Stand by me: the risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*, Harvard University Press, 2002.

7. MENTORING: WHAT WORKS

Supporting and involving parents

A 2002 study of ten youth mentoring programmes, found that 'youth are more likely to benefit if mentors know [their mentees'] families'.[29] Similarly, the DuBois et al. study found that schemes which supported and involved parents had improved outcomes.[30]

There may be a number of reasons for this, including the importance of avoiding a rivalrous situation arising between mentor and parent(s) and the importance of not marginalising the parent (who may be feeling ashamed, or that they have failed somehow, because their child is involved in a mentoring programme). It may be that parents who are supported by, and become involved in, the mentoring programme come to view the programme as a help, rather than a hindrance, and can also feel in some way 'mentored' themselves. This in turn may help to make difficult family relationships less fraught, which would be

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29 S M Jekielek, K A Moore, E C Hair, and H J Scarupa, *Mentoring: A promising strategy for youth development*, Child Trends, 2002.

30 D L DuBois, B E Holloway, J C Valentine et al, op. cit.

undoubtedly beneficial for the mentee. Jean Rhodes has suggested that schemes should not only acknowledge the feelings of parents but also arrange to discuss directly with parents their perception of their child.[31]

Who benefits?

Conclusions from the DuBois et al. meta-analysis suggest that young people whose emotional development lies midway between well- and poorly-functioning may be the most likely to benefit from mentoring.[32] This means that young people deemed to be ‘at risk’ may be more likely to benefit than young people who are already demonstrating significant personal problems. This latter group is more likely to require help from a range of professionals rather than a non-professional volunteer.

Other research has found that young people who had experienced shorter mentoring relationships also tended to have been referred for professional programmes from mental health or education teams, or had experienced significant levels of abuse.[33]

There is little or no evidence (as yet) which proves mentoring’s effectiveness with particularly vulnerable groups (such as young people who are struggling academically, young offenders, young people who have a parent who is in prison, young people in – or leaving – the care system, young people suffering from mental health problems and young people who have suffered sexual abuse or trauma); indeed, for some of these groups there is evidence that it is ineffective.

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[31] J E Rhodes, op. cit.

[32] D L DuBois et al, 2002, op. cit.

[33] J B Grossman and J E Rhodes, ‘The test of time: predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring programs’, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2002.

Consistency and continuity

The Across Ages projects in the US is a drug prevention model programme targeting young people aged 10 to 13 years old. It includes being mentored by someone at least 50 years old and has found that 'weekly face-to-face contact for a minimum of two hours' is necessary for the intervention to be effective.[34] David Dubois also refers to the seven 'Cs' which he believes are necessary elements of effective mentoring. Two of these are consistency ('regular meetings are necessary for mutual trust and ease of contact to take root') and continuity ('the greatest benefits come from relationships lasting at least a year').[35] In a similar vein, other research found that 'youth are more likely to benefit if mentors maintain frequent contact with them'.[36]

The evidence therefore strongly points to the frequency of contact between mentors and mentees and the length of relationship as being crucial for the effectiveness of mentoring. Mentoring that lasts only a few months and which includes only minimal contact (say, an hour a week) does not really work, according to the research.

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34 American Youth Policy Forum, *Youth Mentoring: Programs and Practices that Work*, 2006. See www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2006/fb091506.htm

35 D L DuBois, B E Holloway, J C Valentine et al, op. cit. The other five 'C's necessary for effective mentoring, according to DuBois, are: '*Compatibility of youth and mentor:* similarities in interests are important, but closeness in age or ethnicity are not. Some youth are also better able than others to benefit from mentoring relationships. *Capability of mentor:* prior experience in helping roles or professions in areas such as education or direct-service work with youth is helpful, as is sensitivity to the mentee's cultural and socioeconomic background. *Closeness*: therapeutic qualities such as empathy, authenticity, trust, and collaboration are important, and so is having fun. Negative or disappointing exchanges can easily overshadow the positive aspects. *Centeredness on youth's developmental needs:* balance attention to youth's needs for ownership, autonomy, and input with structure, scaffolding, and guidance. *Connectedness:* benefits of mentoring accrue, in part, through improvements in the mentee's other relationships as well – with peers and parents. Mentoring involving several mentors and mentees also shows promise.'

36 S M Jekielek, K A Moore, E C Hair, and H J Scarupa, op. cit.

There is of course a simple analogy between good mentoring and good parenting. The research indicates that young people – in order to develop well emotionally, socially, educationally – need the frequent and consistent support of at least one mature, respectful and experienced adult. Adults who lack these qualities, who cannot, or will not, provide frequent and consistent support, prove to be much less effective, and arguably harmful, to the young people they try to mentor.

Mentoring becomes more effective the closer it comes to assuming the role of a responsible and emotionally available parent. A minimum of two hours contact with a young person every week might not sound much like what a good parent should offer a child. But it is similar to the time spent by the average working parent with their children: according to data from the Office for National Statistics, parents spend an average of 19 minutes per day, or just over two hours per week, caring for their own children.[37]

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[37] Office for National Statistics, *How we spend our time: the time use survey*, HMSO, 2005.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Good mentoring can work for some specific groups of troubled young people. There is, however, no evidence that it works for all young people.

The Government, the MBF and individual mentoring organisations should all therefore stop encouraging the delusion that mentoring is some kind of panacea for disaffected youth. Mentoring in the UK should be overhauled so that it is based on what has been shown to be effective. The current review of the APS should only be seen as the first step in such a process.

The need to overhaul mentoring should not mean that a strait-jacket is imposed on the voluntary sector: the variety and diversity of possible approaches which the voluntary sector is able to provide is a potential strength, not a weakness. But it does mean that mentoring should be recognised as a highly skilled, specific form of intervention for troubled youths. It should therefore be far more tightly focussed on those youths for whom it can work, more rigorously controlled and more carefully monitored. This will involve the MBF adopting the following recommendations. The MBF should:

- abandon the current Approved Provider Standard and replace it with a far more prescriptive and compulsory inspection scheme for those youth mentoring schemes which receive public funds;
- undertake a properly resourced control trial to ascertain for which groups of young people mentoring schemes can be effective; those groups for whom no evidence exists that mentoring works should no longer receive this intervention;
- replace its 'Priority 1 – influencing national policy/practice' with a commitment to help those whom mentoring schemes are expected to help;
- require all youth mentoring schemes to – at a minimum – make three attempts (via a personal visit, not merely a letter) to contact any mentee whose mentoring relationship has ended prematurely (for whatever reason) with a view to offering either alternative mentoring or further support from another organisation;
- ensure that all mentoring schemes offer frequent and consistent support to mentees. This is likely to involve, as a minimum, contact of two hours a week for at least one year;
- ensure that those applying for roles which involve the management of mentoring schemes, and supervision of mentors, have a qualification in, or professional experience of, a relevant subject such as counselling, group work/group facilitation or psychotherapy;
- ensure that all mentoring literature should explain the difficulties and stresses involved in being a mentor and the potentially harmful effects on young people of mentoring relationships that end prematurely;

- review the selection criteria for mentors so that only those with the necessary skills and character are able to become approved mentors.

There are of course numerous reasons why some young people are more likely to have problems than others. Poverty, unemployment, poor housing and education and many other concerns can all play a part. But a common factor is that, all too often, there is a void in their lives caused by the absence, or the low quality, of parenting. To some degree, and in some cases, mentoring may be able to help.

This void cannot simply be filled, however, by poorly trained volunteers, who in turn are managed by inadequately trained supervisors. It is time for the Government to recognise that mentoring troubled children requires carefully recruited and well-trained individuals who are able to provide consistent and committed support – and to provide the structure and funding to enable this to happen.

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Government support for youth mentoring has contributed greatly to its expansion as a way of helping vulnerable children and young adults.

Mentoring is an approach which can work for some people, particularly the closer it comes to replicating the role of a good parent. In too many cases, however, mentoring relationships fall below this standard. Inexperienced, lightly trained and supervised mentors are all too often expected to turn round the lives of troubled youths.

As Jill Kirby observes, this can be seen as a case study of how the Government has failed to get to grips with social breakdown. For, despite its claims, mentoring is not a panacea for the problems of troubled youths. Instead it should be recognised as a highly skilled approach suitable only for specific groups of children.

Price £10.00