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Thinking and rethinking the child protection system. Mentoring, an unexplored enough resource

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Abstract. Site-based youth mentoring programs provide a unique context for positive youth development. Conceptually, youth derive benefit not only from the mentor alliance (i.e., youths' feelings of compatibility with the mentor and satisfaction with the mentoring relationship), but also from their sense of belonging within the program.

This paper is based on an international Erasmus + project, titled Now What?: Preparing and Empowering Youth Leaving Care Now What?: Preparing and Empowering Youth Leaving Care, implemented in four European countries (Albania, Greece, Portugal and Romania). One of the major components on the project was to develop a mentoring protocol which was applied in all four countries in the partnership.

The results shown us, as anticipated, youth in the high mentor alliance-high belonging group described contributive experiences consistent with high-quality mentor characteristics (e.g., empathy, acceptance) and high-quality settings (e.g., positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering). In contrast, youth in the low mentor alliance-low belonging group described mentors who were insensitive and noted difficulty connecting with peers.

Keywords. Mentoring, youth leaving care, mentors, mentees.

1. Introduction in the Mentoring Component

1.1. The Mentoring Theory

Mentoring, last but not least, is a relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Mentoring is defined as a one-to-one relationship in which an expert or a senior person voluntarily gives time to teach, support, and encourage another. The term mentor came from Greek mythology from the name of an old man who Odysseus left in charge of his home and his son, Telemachus, while he went on a ten-year journey. Mentor helped the boy become a young man and on occasion saved his life. The concept of mentoring relates to emotional support and guidance usually given by a mature individual to a younger person called a protégé or mentee. There is much refining of the definition in the recent literature on mentoring. Mentoring passes on

knowledge of subjects, facilitates personal development, encourages wise choices, and helps the mentee to make transitions. In other research it is stated that most of the literature primarily examines mentoring in relation to individual development, with the mentor as a friend, career guide, information source, and intellectual guide (Jowett, Shaw & Tarbitt, 1997).

“Mentors are everywhere these days. They are to be found in schools, colleges, places of work, as well as in a variety of projects assisting young people who are variously ‘disadvantaged’, ‘disaffected’, ‘socially excluded’ or ‘vulnerable’. The ‘Big Idea’ of mentoring originated from the United States where the early ‘Big Brother, Big Sister’ projects were pioneered and where belief in mentoring interventions has continued to fuel their expansion. In part influenced by these developments, mentoring has become a significant component of youth policies around the world, even though it has been subject to little conceptual interrogation or research into its effectiveness” (Dubberley, Stein, 2006).

In the literature, mentoring is used to describe many “different types of relationships” – there is no simple definition or classification. However, different forms of mentoring have been defined by Dubberley and Stein, 2006:

- their origin, whether ‘naturally’ occurring within families or communities as distinct from ‘artificial’ or professionally promoted
- the type of mentoring relationship : one-to-one; one-to-group; peer mentoring
- the site of mentoring, for example, whether the mentoring takes place in a school, workplace, project or local community setting.

Beyond these descriptive dimensions, studies have suggested different models or approaches to mentoring. First of all, the purpose of mentoring schemes can be defined on a continuum. This may begin with ‘instrumental’ or ‘engagement mentoring’ linked to ‘hard’ outcomes, such as employment, education or training, or reducing offending behavior, and continue to more ‘expressive’ mentoring linked to ‘soft’ outcomes, such as self-esteem and personal development. Secondly, the process of mentoring can be located on a ‘service-led’ to ‘participatory’ continuum, identifying the extent to which goals are defined by the mentoring service (or project) or are initiated by, negotiated with and agreed by the mentored young person (the mentee) (Dubberley, Stein, 2006).

Mentoring is an increasingly popular way of providing guidance and support to young people in need. Recent years have seen youth mentoring expand from a relatively small youth intervention (usually for youth from single-parent homes) to a cornerstone youth service that is being implemented in schools, community centers, faith institutions, school-to-work programs, and a wide variety of other youth-serving institutions. While almost any child can benefit from mentoring, those who design and implement mentoring programs also need guidance and support. Running an effective mentoring program is not easy, and there are many nuances and programmatic details that can have a big impact on outcomes for youth. Recent mentoring research even indicates that a short-lived, less-than-positive mentoring relationship (a hallmark of programs that are not well designed) can actually have a negative impact on participating youth. Mentoring is very much worth doing, but it is imperative that programs implement proven, research based best practices if they are to achieve their desired outcomes¹.

Mentoring has evolved to embrace a wide range of activities in recent years²: from being allocated individuals who respond to queries that an individual has and give moral support, to

¹ <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/effective-strategies-for-providing-quality-youth-mentoring-in-schools2.pdf>

² <https://www.reading.ac.uk/engageinmentoring/what-is-mentoring/eim-definitions.aspx>

schemes that border on counselling given the complexity of the needs of the mentee (Jowett, Shaw & Tarbitt, 1997).

A sound working definition was offered by Eric Parsloe et al, 2016: 'Mentoring is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be.' There are particular words and phrases in this quote that draw our attention³:

- 'Supporting' and 'encouraging' suggest it is non-directive.
- 'Manage their own learning' suggests that the responsibility for this lies with the mentee.
- 'Maximize potential, develop their skills, improve their performance' identifies the spirit of growth and development.
- 'The person they want to be' clarifies that this is about an individual establishing their own goals with help.

It is important also to recognize what mentoring is not. Mentoring is not counselling, because there is an assumption that the mentees involved in mentoring are well enough to engage in it on the above terms. If a mentee has sufficient emotional difficulties they will either need a trained counsellor to provide them with support in addition to a highly trained mentor, or will simply need counselling. Mentoring isn't coaching either. Mentors do offer some of their life experiences and knowledge to help mentees, but still try not to be directive or to take too much control of the relationship (Hallam, et al. 2012). Coaching typically requires minimal and highly controlled sharing of experience and knowledge. It is important to recognize, however, that the skills involved in mentoring, coaching and counselling have a huge overlap, of which empathy, listening and asking questions are key.

The key principles of being a mentor can be summarised as follows (Parsloe et al, 2016, Swanborn, 2010):

- Mentoring should be a structured dialogue where reflection is facilitated by the mentor.
- The mentoring relationship should be based on trust, confidentiality, mutual respect and sensitivity.
- The relationship should be based on agreed boundaries and ground rules that address the power differentials between the mentor and mentee.
- Mentors should seek advice or assistance regarding sustaining and developing the mentoring interaction if needed.
- The mentor should allow the mentee to drive the relationship and encourage them to take increasing responsibility for their own self-reflection and development. There should be no coercion or mentor agenda.
- A mentor should help the mentee identify goals and challenges and set priorities for relevant personal growth.
- Mentors should acknowledge the benefits they gain from the process of mentoring.
- Mentors should seek to use supporting resources that facilitate and sustain the engagement of the mentee.

1.2. Different Types of Mentoring

Based on different criteria, mentoring can be divided in different categories. The most common ones are as follows (Eric Parsloe et al, 2016, Hallam, et al. 2012):

Informal mentoring: Informal mentoring is a natural component of relationships that occurs throughout the society, in the workplace, as well as in social, professional, and family activities. Informal mentoring occurs in a relationship between two people where one gains insight,

³ <https://www.reading.ac.uk/engageinmentoring/what-is-mentoring/eim-definitions.aspx>

knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other. Either person may initiate the mentoring relationship, the mentor to help the other, the protégé/ mentee to gain wisdom from a trusted person. Informal mentoring by definition has very little structure or is loosely structured based upon chemistry between two people to be involved in a mentoring relationship. Informal mentoring will sometimes even develop into a long-term friendship.

Formal mentoring: Formal mentoring programs are pervasive. The literature studies formal mentoring, its effectiveness, and many of its aspects. Many people may not have the opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship in an informal way. The organization implementing a formal mentoring program has an investment in all its members and must develop each mentee to the greatest extent possible. This is why formal mentoring programs are developed and operated within organizations. Formal mentoring is structured, is based on specific objectives, is often measured, and brings people together on the basis of compatibility. A formal relationship typically lasts for a specified amount of time and then formally ends (although sometimes a mentoring pair may decide to continue their mentoring relationship informally at that time).

One-to-one mentoring: This type of mentoring is the most common one whether on a formal or informal basis. In this traditional model, one mentor is matched with one mentee, and a program manager monitors the match's progress over the course of 6-12 months. Usually, the matches are deliberate; the mentoring program manager pairs two people together based on certain criteria, such as experience, skill sets, goals, personality, and a variety of other factors. Because it's a "familiar" model, people tend to be comfortable with it. This model allows for—and even encourages—the mentor and mentee to develop a personal relationship. The one-on-one nature of the relationship provides the mentee with critical individual support and attention.

Group mentoring: For this type of mentoring, there is one adult (the mentor) for a group of up to four young persons. Group mentoring allows mentees to interact with other participants from similar life experiences. Youth can explore feelings with other youth which normalizes the transition from one stage of their lives to another. Group mentoring also allows for the transmission of information and skill building on relevant topics such as preparing for a job interview, finding housing and improving personal communication, for the case of youth who are going to leave the care system.

E-mentoring: For this type of mentoring, the use of Internet is essential. The mentoring relationship is conducted via the Internet, as an independent program or added component of existing programs. These programs require technology in place that provides a safe and secure environment for communication exchanges, archives all messages and enables the tracking of communications between mentoring pairs. Online mentoring is occasionally compared unfavorably with face to face [mentoring](#). The medium limits the ability to pick up on visual or social clues, makes immediate feedback difficult and can often be seen as impersonal. However, e-mentoring can make participants more willing to offer honest feedback. It is also being embraced more readily by those in business who want to become mentors, as e-mentoring is less time-consuming than face-to-face mentoring.

Reverse mentoring: Reverse mentoring flip-flops the typical mentoring relationship: Rather than an experienced older person taking an inexperienced colleague under his or her wing, the inexperienced (and younger) person acts as the mentor who provides insights into emerging new topics, technology and trends or, simply, a younger perspective. The relationship is often defined as a younger/older paradigm, but some research indicates peer-to-peer mentoring is also referred to as reverse mentoring. Usually, a mentor is expected to be more senior and more experienced than his or her mentee. However, reverse mentoring recognizes that there are skills

gaps on both sides, and that each person can address their weaknesses with the help of the other's strengths.

2. The Now What project

The mentoring component was used in an international Erasmus+ project titled “Now What?: Preparing and Empowering Youth Leaving Care”. The project develops and implements different activities in order to prepare children and youth to leave the care system of their country and enter independent adult life. Such activities include a research phase, when their educational needs are expressed, an educational element, since youth will be trained in specific life skills and empowerment activities, the most important of which is the development of a mentoring relationship between each participating care leaver and an adult.

In the case of the Now What mentoring program, due to the existing living circumstances of the youth staying in alternative care institutions, mentoring will be formal, face-to-face and one-to-one. The mentoring will be formal because comparatively for the specific target group the benefits will be more substantial in comparison to informal mentoring which usually takes place in the frame of a family or circle of relatives. Moreover, formal mentoring has established goals and measurable outcomes, also including elements which facilitate its implementation such as the training of mentors, their strategic pairing with mentees and the open access for all. On the other hand, one-to-one mentoring was promoted since it focuses on the individual development of the mentee, it is more personal and less demanding in terms of time dedicated and of scheduling meetings. Furthermore, for the group of care leavers, only one-to-one mentoring can offer the “personal” relationship that is the hallmark of a one-to-one mentoring relationship while minimizing any potential competition which might occur in the group mentoring. Finally, taking advantage of some elements of the peer mentoring, the Now What mentoring program made efforts to attract and recruit mentors who have experienced the care system as children and/or adolescents so that they share their experiences for the care system to their mentees and act as role models for them.

Recruiting for a program or organization brings people together who share a common goal. For a mentoring program, this means gathering people together who want to make a difference in a young person's life (Megginson, Clutterbuck, 1995).

In our project we took into consideration few specific elements that characterize the mentors. The chart below shows some common *examples*, which could be used for those mentors participating in the NOW WHAT project:

Personal Qualities	Demographics	Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Honest ● Dependable ● Well-educated ● Caring ● Empathetic ● Professional ● Religious ● Resilient ● Outgoing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ages 30–45 ■ Men/Women ■ Specific race/ethnicity ■ Living on the west side of town ■ College graduate ■ Owns vehicle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ University students ■ Doctors ■ Lawyers ■ Social workers ■ Local artists and musicians ■ Psychologists ■ Care professionals ■ Teachers

What makes a successful mentor recruitment effort is not just the specific strategies. It is also the attitudes, personalities, and diligence behind the effort. While planning and strategies are

important, good mentoring recruitment is always in the *doing*, not just the planning. Recruiting mentors is a hands-on, face-to-face endeavor. It's about making personal connections. Because of this, even the best plans can get derailed if program staff members and mentors are not prepared, give up easily, or don't allow adequate time or resources to do the work. Conversely, even an average plan can find great success if the people leading the charge are skilled, motivated, and working together (Yin, 2009).

3. Mentoring Programmes for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

3.1. National, International and European Experience

The field of mentoring has grown substantially over the past two decades generating different types of approaches or models, within a variety of settings and with service to increasingly high risk youth. Although innovation in and expansion of youth mentoring programs are positive trends, it is still imperative that structured mentoring programs are developed and implemented using consistent standards supported by research.

The Now What project has carried out extensive research in order to identify those mentoring programs for youth in care that could serve as good practice examples for the project's mentoring component. Data from initiatives and programs from the participating countries (Portugal, Romania, Albania and Greece) has been gathered and assessed, European projects focusing on mentoring youth in care have been evaluated, and international programs with similar goals and objectives have been sought, in order to transfer good practices in the field in the project, avoid potential barriers and learn from past, successful experiences.

Based on the research, the following programs have been selected as good practice examples, with elements that can be replicated for the Now What project:

1. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA). This program is a community mentoring program which matches a volunteer adult mentor to an at-risk child or adolescent to delay or reduce antisocial behaviors; improve academic success, attitudes and behaviors, peer and family relationships; strengthen self-concept; and provide social and cultural enrichment. It matches adult volunteer mentors with an at-risk child, with the expectation that a caring and supportive relationship will develop. Mentors are selected, screened, and matched by BBBSA staff, and staff monitors the relationship and maintains contact with the mentor, child, and parent/guardian throughout the matched relationship. Matches are made based on shared goals and interests of the child and adult volunteer. Mentors are expected to meet with the child at least 3-5 hours per week for a period of 12 months or longer. Ongoing case management by BBBSA staff provides supervision of the relationship, and can provide advice and guidance to the mentor, as well as support and encouragement. The program has been considered as one of the most successful ones in the field of mentoring youth in care and has demonstrated significant results in terms of the educational progress of the youth and their empowerment to build quality relationships⁴.
2. Lifeguides: The LIFEGUIDES program, run by the Foundation for Foster Children, offers 17-23-year olds transitioning out of the foster care system a mentor dedicated to providing social and emotional support. Mentors assist with general life skills training and facilitate the transitions from high school to vocational training, college, or a new job. Through the LIFEGUIDES program, youth who are in out-of-home foster care, extended foster care or those living independently and receiving Post-Secondary Educational Services and Support (PESS), are matched with a supportive community

⁴ <https://www.blueprintsprograms.org/programs/8999999/big-brothers-big-sisters-of-america/print/>

volunteer trained to help them transition to adulthood and independence. The mentor is expected to meet with the mentee at least 1 hour on a weekly basis at the minimum of 12 weeks, hoping to form long-term relationships that last into the mentees' adulthood. After the completion of the 12 weeks, mentors and mentees may choose to mutually continue meeting organically while still receiving support from the Foundation.

3. The "Referent" programme (Spain) offers to older youth transitioning out of foster care and at risk of social exclusion (aged 17-23) a volunteer who becomes a mentor for them and supports them in their path to emancipation. Mentors are people aged 30-60 who undertake to provide continuity to the relationship by being a part of their social network after six months of mentor training and support. The volunteers offer the young people multiple kinds of support (emotional, cultural knowledge, communication and social skills, support in studies, job seeking and housing). The project is run by Punt de Referència Association, a non-profit organisation founded in 1997. It has been working to promote full social integration, equal opportunities and improving the quality of life of older young transitioning out of foster care and at risk of social exclusion, mentoring them in their transition process.
4. The Children and Youth in Care and Mentoring Project was established in 2014 when funding from Alberta Human Services was provided with the goal of increasing the number of children and youth in care with access to a mentor. The purpose of the project is to foster meaningful relationships between mentors and vulnerable youth. Three established mentoring organizations, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area, and the Red Deer Youth and Volunteer Centre Foundation, joined the project by developing and/ or growing mentoring programming for children and youth in care and participating in a program evaluation. The three sites combined report 339 new matches as of March 2016 made during this pilot, supporting children and youth in forming healthy and enduring mentoring relationships with caring adults while receiving intervention services, throughout transitions and post care.
5. Mentoring and Buddying Scheme by the Rees Foundation. This project brings together in a mentoring relationship ex care leavers and youth who are going to leave care. Care leavers interested in becoming a Peer Buddy and or Mentor will be given training. Peer Buddies help reduce isolation and loneliness by developing social connections and Mentors help with CV preparation, looking for employment, education and training and or accompanying them to interviews, advocating with social workers, housing providers, attending midwife sessions, mental health services, providing practical life and social skills (Tobin, 2004).

4. Discussions and conclusions

Successfully matching and pairing mentors and mentees is critical. It is one of the crucial factors of success of any mentoring program and therefore it should be carefully designed and executed. Regarding the Now What project, the matching process was based on the following elements:

- Development of those variables to be considered so that the best matches are achieved. Such variables are:
 - matching mentors with care leavers who have similar life stories
 - matching mentors with care leavers who have similar nationalities (especially in the case of unaccompanied minors)

Other variables and characteristics which were taken into account when making the matches are interests; proximity; availability; age; gender; race; ethnicity; personality; expressed

preferences of mentor and mentee; goals; strengths; previous experiences. Although research suggests that matching based on race, ethnicity and socioeconomic factors should be considered, the mentor's qualities and behaviors are the most significant because the mentor has the greatest responsibility for the success of the match.

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