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Academic Paper

Mentoring, social capital and young people

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Abstract

Past research concludes that youth mentoring achieves significant but modest change, although mentees' opinions are often absent. This article examines how mentoring is experienced by those participating. The interpretive, qualitative methodology used gives voice to those involved. Social capital theory is used to explore how mentoring relationships are built and achieve change. The article concludes that the mentoring process and relationship can develop mentees' protective assets and enable social capital exchange. These increase mentees' self-awareness, sense of agency and confidence, and therefore the likelihood of achieving desired change. The article concludes by outlining programme and mentor good practice.

Keywords

social capital, youth mentoring, volunteer mentors, mentees

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Introduction

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) defines mentoring thus: *"A voluntary, mutually beneficial and purposeful relationship in which an individual gives time to support another to enable them to make changes in their life".* National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) (2011).

Planned mentoring originated in the early 20th century, where organised religions in the US offered adult befrienders to young people at risk of imprisonment, believing that such role models would keep them out of the criminal justice system. There are now several large-scale, franchised US mentoring programmes, the largest of which is Big Brother, Big Sister (BBBS). Despite mentoring's widespread adoption as a form of youth work in the UK, with hundreds (Shaw & Bernardes, 2018; Gannon & Washington, 2019) of schemes running, using mentoring as a planned intervention to deliver youth policy targets only dates back to the 1997-2010 New Labour Government. Mentoring's adoption matched the policy move from universal services for young people to services targeted at those deemed to require remedial action to overcome difficulties in their lives, achieve 'social mobility' and avoid social exclusion.

Current UK Government policy takes an instrumental view of youth mentoring with mentors working in crime prevention programmes, as specialist job coaches and in programmes to increase community engagement and social mobility. The success of such programmes is measured in terms of reduced involvement in crime, increased engagement in employment and/or participation in society. This article explores how mentoring is experienced by mentees, mentors, mentoring coordinators, and referring organisations and the changes they identify. Analysis of the research findings is underpinned by social capital theory.

Literature review

Most empirical youth mentoring research comes from the US with its longer tradition of youth mentoring and the US Government and philanthropic funding of programmes. The predominant research methodology is quantitative, using large mentoring-related data sets including those collected for research funded by Private/Public Ventures (P/PV) a now disbanded non-profit body, between 1988 and 1995. Empirical research has been carried out on BBBS (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Spencer 2007; Christensen, Hagler, Stams, Raposa, Burton & Rhodes 2020) and other large-scale programmes such as Friends of the Children (Eddy, Martinez, Grossman, Cearley, Herrera, Wheeler, Rempel, Foney, Gau, Burraston, Harachi, Haggerty, & Seeley 2017). However, findings from US programmes may not be directly relatable to the UK, with Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) in England discontinuing in 2004, BBBS in Ireland requiring programme modifications and encountering funding and implementation issues not experienced in US (Brady & Curtin, 2012; Silke, Brady & Dolan 2019). The evaluation of Chance UK, a mentoring programme for 5–11-year-olds based on DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine (2011) findings that programmes focusing on developing self-esteem and self-efficacy were most effective, found no statistically significant effects (Axford, Bjornstad, Matthews, Whybra, Berry, Ukoumunne, Hobbs, Wrigley, Brook, Taylor, Eames, Kallitsoglou, Blower & Warner, 2020).

Other than evaluating BBBS in Ireland and Chance UK, recent empirical UK mentoring research is limited to the evaluation of the Dalston Youth Programme (now Mentoring Plus) (Shiner, Young, Newburn & Groben 2004; Newburn & Shiner 2006). More recently summaries of the state of UK mentoring involving literature reviews and interviews with mentors have recommended developing an English evidence base (Shaw & Bernardes, 2018).

Measurable outcomes identified in the literature include harm avoidance (e.g., avoiding youth justice/early parenthood) and/or improving life chances (e.g., academic engagement, emotional wellbeing, increased confidence, better relationships) (Higley, Walker, Bishop, & Fritz, 2016; Rhodes, Grossman and Resch, 2000). However, change, although statistically significant, was found to be on average small (Philip & Spratt, 2007; DuBois et al., 2011; Shaw & Bernardes, 2018).

Ziegler, Gryc, Hopp & Stoeger (2021 p.174), identify the ‘mentoring paradox’, whereby meta-analysis of outcomes from mentoring research reveals small change whereas individual mentees talk of more significant impact from mentoring. The variations in findings may result from large-scale reviews masking more significant individual change (Rhodes, 2008), or variations caused by difference in programme set up and quality (Busse, Campbell & Kipping, 2018).

Young people with reduced access to education, material resources and social networks or support i.e., with ‘disadvantaged social status’ (Shaw & Bernardes, 2018) are at risk of becoming vulnerable to poor outcomes (Williams & Le Menestrel, 2013 p. 98), a situation faced by many mentees. However, having assets, or qualities that protect from harm and risk (Rutter, 1987) and resources, opportunities in the external environment, can help young people thrive and achieve positive outcomes. These assets cannot be definitively categorised because they vary depending upon the risk but include coping skills, agency, social skills and competence (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). For Farruggia, Bullen, Davidson, Dunphy, Solomon & Collins (2011),

Zimmerman, Phelps & Lerner (2008) and Phelps, Balsano, Fay, Peltz, Zimmerman, Lerner & Lerner (2007), all young people have assets which can help them develop positively and which they can activate themselves, supported by adults including through mentoring (Phelps et al., 2007; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Mentees need to be willing participants in mentoring, with extrinsic pressure to attend likely to lead to relationship breakdown (Spencer, 2007; DeWit, DuBois, Erdem, Larose, Lipman & Spencer, 2016).

As well as internal assets, individuals may have access to external resources embedded in social networks around them, including new information, contacts, companionship, and practical and emotional support. Access to resources in social networks positively impacts wellbeing and life chances (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These ‘social and economic resources embodied in social networks’ (Putnam, 2000 p. 19), are also known as ‘social capital’ (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

To make the resources within a social network directly usable requires time, effort and unceasing sociability which creates a sense of obligation amongst network members (Bourdieu, 1986). Relationships built on trust, obligation and shared norms allow members to combine resources to pursue their goals and achieve outcomes and change that would not otherwise be possible (Putnam, 2000 and Coleman, 1988). Social capital can be a ‘weapon’ to bring about change for those without many other resources (Putnam, 2000).

Social connections are linked with the development of assets including ‘capacity to trust,’ ability to cooperate, ‘communications, organisational skills, tolerance towards others, confidence,’ ‘self-worth’ and ‘willingness to take the initiative’ (Field, 2005 p. 29). Shared values within the relationship can help increase appreciation of other views and perspectives and lead to cooperation. Social connection encourages tolerance and participation which can help with decision-making and judgement (Field, 2005). Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis & Wu (2017) note correlation between high quality mentoring relationships and improvements to other relationships.

Social networks involving trusting relationships are a learning resource, allowing the exchange of ideas and information to create applicable knowledge which helps make sense of the world, overcome socio-economic disadvantage (Field 2005, Putnam, 2000) and create new social capital (Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson, 1996). Possession of social capital is linked to an individual’s ‘sense of self-worth and self-efficacy’ (Field, 2003 p. 59), increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Social capital from relationships with people like each other, such as friends and family, is ‘**bonding’** capital and helps individuals ‘get by.’ Bonding capital enhances applicable learning and coping assets (Field, 2003). **Bridging** capital, social capital associated with looser connections to those in different social circles, helps individuals to ‘get on’ (Putnam 2000) and can be a ‘magic wand’ (Putnam, 2000 p. 362) as well as providing ‘unexpected opportunities’ (Field 2003). However, because bridging capital involves individuals with little in common, it is difficult to accumulate. Networks are powerful and valuable and the ability to access social capital within them can make significant differences to life chances (Field, 2003; Calvert, Emery & Kinsey, 2013).

On the one hand, the literature finds that mentoring can offer consistent benefits in different settings, (DuBois et al, 2011) but notes that the changes identified are modest (Shaw & Bernardes, 2018). However, Rhodes (2004) remarks on the transformational ability of relationships and Raposa, Rhodes, Stams, Card, Burton, Schwartz, Sykes, Kanchewa, Kupersmidt & Hussain (2019) note the significant impact that even small improvements can have on youth development longer term.

Mentees’ views and opinions are less often heard but where these are recorded, are more focused on building self-confidence and communication skills (assets for the purpose of this research) and having a more positive view of themselves (or self-concept) (Clayden & Stein, 2005; Philip, 2008)

than achieving employment or reducing truancy. Gallagher & Morgan (2013) and Salter (2018) highlight the value of the youth work process in developing young people's assets rather than focusing solely on the outcomes. Rhodes' theoretical model proposes that mentors help mentee development through 'a) enhancing social skills and emotional well-being b) improving cognitive skills through instruction and dialogue and c) fostering identity development by serving as role model and advocate' (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang & Noam, 2006 p. 692). This useful model, findings from the literature and the desire to understand mentees' views gave rise to research questions, two of which are discussed here:

RQ1: How do those involved experience youth mentoring?

RQ2: How do any outcomes of youth mentoring relate to the development of assets and social capital in young people?

Methodology

The qualitative methodology selected allowed "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014), letting participants select what to talk about, in their own words (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Similarly, the views of mentoring coordinators are often overlooked, despite their significant experience gained over time (Gannon & Washington, 2019). The review of literature highlighted the lack of understanding of the mentoring processes that lead to outcomes, an aspect that can be explored through a qualitative methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

A qualitative methodology enables the discovery of results which are unexpected (Cohen et al., 2011), helpful when the researcher was also a mentor with preconceptions and assumptions based on her own experience. Data collection methods were selected to allow consideration of many points of view. A qualitative methodology both values researcher experience AND challenges assumptions through reflection and learning from others (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ethical approval was granted by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Given that different results are ascribed to different mentoring programme structures (Busse, Campbell & Kipping, 2018), using a case allowed in-depth analysis (Creswell, 2014), exploration of perspectives of complexity and contradictions and learning through experience (Flyvberg, 2006) in a naturally occurring setting (Denscombe, 2003). Using a case allowed exploration of outcomes associated with processes and relationships (Denscombe, 2003) such as building rapport as well as challenging assumptions (Campbell, 1975), important where the researcher was also a mentor.

MyTime, the case selected, was a UK local government youth mentoring programme offering individual support by trained volunteer adult mentors to young people aged between 11 and 18 (or 25 in the case of learning difficulties) facing challenges that could involve them or their family situation e.g., living with autism or being a young carer. These challenges meant that young people referred were working with professional services below statutory Social Services involvement. Children with unaddressed, severe mental health issues or a history of violence were not generally eligible.

Despite the mentoring being around an hour a week for about six months, a short amount of time, mentor, mentee, referrer, and coordinator feedback suggested mentees achieved beneficial change. Given the variety of individuals involved, of situations explored, and of relationships formed, the research focused on identifying any underlying patterns and themes to help understand the mentoring process and how it achieved change.

The experiences of seven mentors, seven mentees, four referrers and two mentoring coordinators were explored through semi-structured interviews to create rapport and place interviewees as experiential experts (Smith & Osborn, 2008), important considerations for vulnerable young people. Interviewing allowed participants to co-create knowledge (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and to use language to reconstruct subjective social reality (Twining, Heller, Nussbaum & Tsai, 2017). Elicitation techniques involving document creation were used to stimulate discussion (Grant, 2018) and to give young people agency (Mannay, 2015).

Convenience sampling was used to recruit mentors at MyTime mentoring events. Some mentors then encouraged their mentees to participate, snowball sampling. Thirty mentors took part in focus groups during an annual MyTime Mentors Networking event. Five mentors who had expressed an interest in participating in the research but who were unable to take part in interviews responded to a small scale, online survey comprising 20 open-ended and unstructured text answers.

The research was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Initial mentee, mentor and coordinator interviews were carried out face-to-face. Second interviews with mentors and coordinators were carried out online via Microsoft Teams in line with guidance issued by the OU HREC. Two second mentee interviews were carried out in person pre-pandemic, but contact was lost with the remaining five. The difficulties faced by such families during the pandemic can only be imagined.

The data collected were analysed via six-stage reflexive thematical analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using codes based on the researcher’s informed intuition. Analysis generated themes and helped understand causes (Cohen et al., 2011).

Findings related to mentoring experience

Mentors, mentees, referrers and mentoring coordinators were asked about their experience of mentoring, particularly from the perspective of young people. The themes presented show where similarities and differences between them occurred.

Mentoring is purposeful and requires effort

For mentors, mentees, coordinators and referrers, the purpose of mentoring was to help young people change and progress in helpful ways. All expected a mentoring relationship to be more than enjoyable companionship, although this was important. Mentors and mentees felt that young people who benefitted from mentoring exhibited certain characteristics - being open to change and ready and willing to share their concerns - which required considerable courage. The mentoring process required effort from the mentors and mentees, so it was essential that mentees chose to take part and were prepared to identify and talk about the change they wanted. Some mentees originally attended sessions to satisfy others but continued when they could see mentoring’s benefit for themselves.

Mentoring is more than an emotional connection

The connection between mentor and mentee was deemed important. Although a close relationship was desirable, participants felt mentoring could be based on mutual respect and civility rather than close emotional attachment. Indeed, some mentors felt that being too emotionally involved could cloud their judgement and that some distance was preferable.

> *The reason for being there is to try and to help and develop these kids but if you're emotionally involved, because you like that person in front of you, are you the best person for it? Mentor, Focus group.*

Nevertheless, mentees interviewed indicated that they did have close relationships with their mentors whom they respected and by whom they felt liked. Mentees talked of enjoying spending time with their mentors.

Mentees said that it was important that mentors listened, were non-judgemental, maintained confidentiality and took an interest and these qualities helped establish trust. Building trust was seen as essential to relationship formation, and more important than a close emotional attachment. Mentors encouraged mentees to trust them by modelling trustworthy behaviour such as observing confidentiality, being reliable, respectful and punctual. One mentor pointed out that being part of the MyTime programme enhanced the sense of mentor trustworthiness.

The flexibility and responsiveness of the MyTime programme format and its volunteer mentors were integral to building trust and facilitating change. Matching mentee preferences for mentor gender, meeting times and locations respected their needs in ways often not available to professional services. Mentoring sessions were held inside or outside, useful during the pandemic, permitting exposure to new experiences and opportunities.

Mentors have no agenda or authority over mentees

Although mentors held themselves responsible for the success of the relationship, they felt that having no ‘agenda’, curriculum or statutory role to cover (unlike, for example, social workers or teachers), allowed considerable freedom to identify which mentee concerns and interests to follow and at what pace.

Mentors kept confidential session summary notes visible to MyTime coordinators but did not monitor mentee behaviour or report back to parents, school or other professional services. They had no authority over their mentees which gave a distinctive level of equity and quality to the relationship. Several mentors remarked that young people who were described as aggressive at school or at home did not exhibit that behaviour with them. Mentors recognised that this relative balance of power was unusual for a young person and for some mentees, having autonomy rather than relying on adults was a new experience.

Format flexibility aids mentoring

As they came to understand their mentee’s interests, mentors introduced them to relevant activities. The variety of these experiences was noteworthy, being tailored to the individual and included attending a reptile fanciers club or taking a long cycle. Mentees talked of benefitting from new opportunities: “*‘I’ve sort of tried a lot more things that I wouldn’t even have thought about… There are loads of them I wouldn’t have bothered trying.” Mentee 7*

Having undivided adult attention and visiting places outside school or home were new experiences for many. Mentors talked of needing to explain that a session was for the young person and of demonstrating this by listening and responding to their needs, a novel experience for some.

The benefits of mentors as ‘outsider’ adults

Mentees said that the fact that mentors had no knowledge of or contact with their social circle was beneficial. This meant that mentors could not betray a confidence even if tempted, and that they were less likely to come with the negative judgements that the young person might be experiencing at home or school. Mentors were trusted and seen as what mentees described as ‘normal.’ This seemed to mentees to use mentors as sounding boards, to see what their reactions were in a lower stakes environment than home or school. One, for example, told his mentor he was participating in extreme dares. Others discussed issues that might be upsetting/contentious at home, such as returning to school after parentally enforced home-schooling. Some felt they could

reveal sides of themselves they kept hidden in other interactions. One said with his mentor, he did not have to "*try to mitigate it* [his situation] *or try to over exaggerate just to make it more entertaining, more serious".*

Talking and conversation unlock self-knowledge

Mentees valued the opportunity to talk to an adult who listened and helped them to explore issues and ideas, rather than telling them what to do, a more usual adult to young person interaction.

> *I got to talk to someone who would actually listen…It's quite nice because you know that they're understanding and they don't just go, 'yeah, yeah, yeah', that sort of thing. Mentee 5*

Recognising that mentees might find it challenging to talk to an unfamiliar adult about feelings and situations, mentors took advantage of the flexibility of the programme to help their mentees discuss their issues. Going for a dog walk or tinkering with a car helped the conversation flow, for example. Exploring issues through questioning and reflecting, helped mentees understand themselves and their situations better, as one explained:

> *And get it out. Even if it's like a jumble of words. Then you can like piece it together… she just listens. And then I explain it. And if I'm struggling, then she'll help me. Mentee 2*

One mentee realised her low mood was part of a pattern rather than being a series of isolated events. As mentees developed their ability to express themselves, mentor and mentee could explore the mentee's needs and deepen the relationship. Since mentors were unfamiliar with mentee's circumstances, they could only suggest and explore options rather than instruct. This resulted in a more collaborative approach to addressing issues than in many adult-child relationships.

Mentors take an interest in their mentees

Taking an interest in the mentee's life helped to bring the mentor and mentee closer despite the initial differences in experiences, age and social circle. Indeed, being from different backgrounds encouraged an exchange of information to find out more about each other and helped them get to know each other and find interests in common. Young people valued their mentor's focus on them and their concerns during a mentoring session. As part of getting to know each other, topics of conversation included mentees' hobbies and interests and taking an interest was considered more important to relationship formation than sharing interests, as one mentee explained:

> *…a genuine interest in your life… if you were to be a mentor, that's a big one… How can I form a relationship if you don't really care about how I'm doing? Mentee 6*

Mentoring offers enjoyable spaces and activities

Shiner et al., (2004) talk of the 'mundane nature' of mentoring but this did not seem to adequately reflect mentor effort to make mentoring sessions welcoming, enjoyable and helpful. Finding the right location was deemed important. A mentoring session was usually associated with a treat such as a drink and cake. Mentees contrasted the places in which mentoring took place with 'official' buildings where they accessed other support services, and which often felt unwelcoming.

Mentoring sessions were positive occasions

Mentors talked of deliberately praising mentees for tackling issues or for achievements, recognising that this acknowledgement might be missing. They introduced humour and fun through

games and sharing stories. Their cheerfulness was remarked upon by mentees who described enjoying mentoring sessions. One remarked it was the 'shining light' in his week. Mentees saw their mentor's cheerfulness as genuine and felt their concerns were taken seriously. One contrasted their mentor's approach with what they perceived as the artificial positivity of some other professional relationships. Whilst helping mentees see themselves in a more positive light, mentors also thought it was important to gently challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviours. Because mentoring lasted six months or so, mentor and mentee had time to explore issues and reflect.

Findings related to assets and social capital theory

The mentoring process helped mentees to develop their assets (qualities that protect from harm and risk (Rutter, 1987)). Being encouraged to speak, converse, discuss and reflect with mentors, helped mentees develop communication skills, which Field (2005) describes as assets. Working together to find solutions for issues when neither had all the answers encouraged mentees to see the benefits of cooperation, as Mentee 2 explained: "*You don't just have to solve things all by yourself, you can do it in teams or groups or whatever.*"

Mentors' trustworthy behaviour increased mentees' ability to trust, an asset (Field, 2005) which was demonstrated by mentees opening up about their situations, attending sessions and the enthusiasm with which they talked about mentoring during interviews. For one mentee, his mentor was the first person with whom he had shared his detailed drawings of game characters.

Mentees demonstrated their knowledge and competence in areas outside the classroom because their experience and expertise differed from those of their mentors, such as in the use of social media. Empowering a young person in this way is likely to increase feelings of self-esteem and competence. Mentors pointed out the assets that mentees had demonstrated such as courage and by 'checking in' at the end of the relationship, reinforced mentee awareness of the progress they had made. Mentees themselves realised that their negative beliefs about themselves were erroneous. One young person reflected in her diary her pleasure in realising that she could tell people around her how she felt about a situation clearly despite thinking she could not make her feelings understood.

Mentoring helps mentees harness assets to access social capital

Trusting their mentor sufficiently to talk about their circumstances, interests and goals, helped mentees to access the social capital in the mentoring relationship and collaborate on developing new solutions. The social capital in the relationship comprised the 'new information, contacts, companionship and practical and emotional support' (Comfort, 2023 p. 50) resulting from the combination of mentor and mentee experience, assets, knowledge and contacts.

Social capital was a learning resource (Field, 2005). Mentors shared personal successes and failures to help mentees understand that achieving goals is a process of trial and error. Because mentoring extended over several months, mentees could put the ideas they discussed with their mentors into practice such as developing social skills by practising 'small talk' with customers in a Saturday job. They could then discuss what happened with their mentor, enhancing the learning process.

From talking to their mentees, mentors could share perspectives, knowledge and experience relevant to the mentee's situation and helped broaden their viewpoint. This included learning that walking away from a brewing row could defuse a difficult situation. One mentor explained to a mentee that she needed to produce evidence about the bullying she was experiencing if she wanted her school to act. The mentee took this advice in her own way, recording her tormentors in

action, and presented this evidence to her teacher which achieved the desired outcome. Mentees thus adapted learning from mentoring so it was directly applicable to their situation.

Bonding social capital

The flexibility of the MyTime mentoring programme facilitated access to bonding capital. Mentors could offer emotional and practical support by accompanying mentees to significant events such as visiting a new school if parents or carers were unable or unwilling to do so. Their mentor's empathy, attunement, and positivity provided appreciated companionship and emotional support for mentees who felt cared about and valued, as Mentee 7 explained: "*It's someone that you can sort of share everything to; that's why I think it's like one of the best things to have."*

Bridging capital

Mentors were happy to share their contacts, experience and knowledge with mentees, thus helping activate bridging social capital (Coleman, 1988) in the mentoring relationship. Mentors widened their mentees' perspectives such as considering A' levels and helped them work out how they might achieve their ambitions. One mentee, interested in a career with animals, was able to explore this interest further by shadowing a vet friend of the mentor for a day, something that would not have been possible without her mentor's contacts.

The backdrop to the issues another mentee faced was his unhappiness at school. Having been a teacher, his mentor suggested online schooling. The mentee was surprised to discover his parents reacted positively to this idea. Their willingness to try a new approach might have been partially influenced by the trust established between mentor, mentee and their family. The mentor's knowledge was combined with the mentee's circumstances to identify a solution not previously identified as possible.

Mentors helped mentees consider others' viewpoints in difficult situations. One young man realised that he could appear very intimidating when he lost his temper in class, by putting himself in his teacher's shoes. Such realisations helped to reduce or even resolve tension in relationships. Mentors also increased their mentee's awareness of and access to community resources such as youth clubs or libraries to help mentees develop their interests and meet like-minded people such as reptile fanciers or young people of their age.

The mentoring relationship helped mentees access resources in their networks

The assets that mentees developed through mentoring helped them access resources in other relationships such as with family and friends. One mentee said that her relationship with her mother had improved because she could talk to her mentor about issues she did not want to discuss with her mother. Another explained that he had become closer to his mother when he shared what he had learned during mentoring and she revealed she had similar issues.

Mentors helped mentees to activate the resources in their networks by identifying people around them who might be able to help such as talking to a teacher about bullying. The mentee who discovered her low mood was a pattern realised that she could get help for this from her CAMHS[1] counsellor. The mentee who learned she could talk about her emotions realised she could talk to her family about how she was feeling and resolve issues rather than "*having a meltdown".*

Mentees said that the assets which they ascribed to mentoring such as confidence and communication skills, including listening, helped them develop or strengthen relationships with existing or new friends. Mentors believed that having experienced productive relationships with other adults through mentoring would encourage mentees to identify people who could help them in the future. The experience of identifying and finding solutions to problems seemed to lead to a

greater realisation amongst mentees that they had agency, or an ability to help themselves and exert some control, rather than having to "*sit in the background with it"* as one mentee explained.

Mentoring can bring about change

Mentees described feeling more confident in their abilities and ascribed this to having a mentor. One remarked that a friend who had not seen her for several years had commented on her increased confidence. Referrers, mentors and coordinators also stated that confidence was a significant outcome of mentoring that they and their mentees observed. Mentees felt more positive about themselves and optimistic about their prospects. They had greater confidence in their decision-making abilities, as eloquently described by this mentee:

> *It's sort of changed my attitude towards most things like school and homelife… it's just gradually happened like. And I've felt happier in everything that I do and in the choices I make… I'm back in school. I'm a lot more positive. I can sort of see things with the big picture. Mentee 7*

Discussion

Thus, through the mentoring relationship, mentees developed protective assets such as communication skills, the ability to trust others and to take advantage of opportunities. Using these assets, let them access the social capital in the mentoring relationship. This social capital was a combination of mentee knowledge of their own situation, their goals and what might work for them with their mentors' life experience and contacts. The social capital in the mentoring relationship resulted partly from the difference in experience and knowledge between mentor and mentee. Harnessing this social capital through combining assets and resources in the relationship helped mentees to identify possible solutions to issues that they faced and to achieve change not previously possible. This supports Gaddis (2012) who finds individuals need relationships and assets to benefit from resources.

A mentoring relationship is the mechanism through which mentees develop protective assets such as self-esteem and access resources such as emotional support (Comfort, 2023). Mentees can employ assets and resources gained from the mentoring relationship in other situations, promoting connections outside the mentoring relationship including with their families. Strengthening connections in other relationships is likely to further increase the social capital to which a mentee has access, particularly bonding capital. Encouraged by their mentor and having benefitted from a supportive mentoring relationship, mentees realised they could help themselves which might include turning to others in their networks for help. Mentors encouraged their mentees to identify who else might be able to help them (Comfort, 2023).

The fact that mentors were supportive but came from outside a mentee's current situation brought bonding and particularly bridging capital. Mentees benefitted from undivided attention and undemanding friendship. They gained access to non-judgmental adult knowledge and expertise with less power imbalance than many adult to child relationships. The process of mentoring was an important contributor to the benefits mentees gained.

Research findings suggested mentees can make greater change than indicated by the empirical literature. For some, mentoring offered consistent, invaluable emotional support at a difficult time. For others, it could change the way they thought about themselves and their options. For those young people who were willing participants and prepared to change, a mentoring relationship could help them develop their assets and resources to change in ways they had not thought possible. Viewing mentoring through the lens of asset and social capital acquisition increases understanding of the processes and practices of mentoring. This study showed the power of mentoring to develop assets and combine them with resources in relationships.

Recommendations for Good Practice

Analysis of how the MyTime programme, its mentors and mentees collaborated to achieve change desired by the young people has led to the recommendations for good practice outlined in the three tables below.

Table 1: Explaining mentoring

Explaining mentoring	Recommendations
Briefing referrers	Provide clear guidance about who can be supported and what support is available.
	Explain the need for mentees to attend voluntarily
	Explain mentoring gives time and space to develop mentee life skills (assets), talk about their concerns and aspirations in enjoyable environment with supportive adult. Asset development can help mentees benefit from support in the relationships around them.
Briefing and preparing mentees	Explain mentoring gives time and space to develop their life skills and problem-solving abilities, talk about their concerns and aspirations in enjoyable environment with supportive adult. They might find they discover support from relationships around them.
	Consider providing information such as interviews with mentors and mentees and case studies to help young people understand what mentoring offers.

Source: Adapted from Comfort, 2023 p269

Table 2: Good Practice for Programmes

Programme Practice	Recommendations
Mentor characteristics to recruit for	Listening skills.
	Interest in people and particularly young people and their development.
	A positive view of young people and their capabilities.
	Collaborative not directive approach to working with young people.
	Resourcefulness, willingness to learn
	Flexibility
	Empathy
	Sense of humour
	Willingness to share life experience to benefit young person
	Tolerance
Training mentors	Emphasise need to be non-judgmental, reliable and empathetic.
	Mentoring is a learning experience for mentor and mentee
	Mentors should not worry about differences between them and mentee in age and outlook: use this difference to find out more and strengthen the relationship.
	Explain how and when to work with coordinators.
Matching	Matching on interests is not essential: taking an interest in the young person is
	Match as far as possible on mentee preference of timing, mentor gender and school/community location.
Reimbursement	Provide funding for food and drink to create a social and nurturing environment.
	Reimburse mentor out- of-pocket expenses to allow participation of broad range of mentors Provide (capped) funding for final treat to help bring mentoring to positive close

Adapted from Comfort, 2023 p.268-9.

Table 3: Good practice for mentors

Good practice for Mentors	Recommendations
Mentoring sessions	Actively listen to mentees.
	Help mentee work on goals to develop sense of agency and mastery.
	Be a role model e.g., be punctual and reliable.
	Be prepared to tolerate different behaviour expectations e.g., about time-keeping.
	Gently challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviours.
	Collaborate to solve issues rather than imposing solutions.
	Help mentees to develop assets, such as social skills.
	Value mentee expertise and learning, including hobbies.
	Share perspectives and life experience to help mentees identify their own solutions.
	Use locations for learning opportunities and experiences e.g., ordering food/drink.
	Boost mentee self-esteem with positive feedback.
	Help mentees see their resources and assets and build on these e.g., pointing out new opportunities.
Venue selection	Consider meeting venues carefully. Avoid home environments. Community locations offer flexibility.
	Venues that permit confidentiality are preferable
Enhance and activate social capital	Work with mentees to establish/re-establish networks of contacts.
	Introduce mentees to new experiences, places, and people.
	Ensure mentees are aware of the networks and adults they can turn to for help once mentoring stops.
Endings	Plan for the end from the outset – endings are positive
	Identify relationship meeting goals e.g., increased mentee confidence and ability to support own aspirations
	Mentor and mentee should decide together when they are ready to finish.
	Consider tapering off support as relationship ends.
	Have a celebratory event to reflect on progress and make the ending positive and constructive.

Source: Adapted from Comfort, 2023 p269-70

Good practice includes the benefits of using community locations and providing funding for food and drink to create a conducive atmosphere. Findings highlight the importance of selecting mentors for specific characteristics including listening skills, a positive view of young people's capabilities and flexibility in outlook. Clear communication by programmes to referrers and young people, illustrating what mentoring offers and who it can support could reduce inappropriate referrals. Mentor training should be realistic, including the challenges of mentoring where the adult is not necessarily in control or knowledgeable about the topics under discussion. Training can emphasise also that the difference between mentor and mentee can be a source of strength rather than a cause for concern. Matching should follow mentee preferences to demonstrate respect towards the young person. By taking an interest in and valuing the knowledge of their mentees, mentors can develop the mentoring relationship. They should help mentees identify their assets and resources to help them reach their goals. Ending the relationship should be seen as positive and occur at a mutually agreed time with an activity to celebrate and reflect on all that the mentee has achieved.

Limitations of study

The participants selected were those who chose to continue with mentoring so may have over-represented the positive outcomes from mentoring. The qualitative methodology used suggests that results may not be generalisable to other cases. However, the research was likely to be applicable to wider contexts because it was embedded in historical, policy and wider discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Additionally, characteristics of the case matched those of many UK mentoring programmes in terms of young people targeted, its voluntary nature, recruitment and training of mentors as well as adhering to good practice as advocated by MENTOR, the US representative body for mentoring (Clawson, Endelman and Heubach, 2015).

Endnotes

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