

Mentoring children guilty of minor first-time crimes: methods, strengths and limitations

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In the absence of evidence regarding the impact of mentoring on child offenders in South Africa, this article explores the strengths and limitations of this approach in a local context. It investigates the theory and methods of mentoring, and presents a case study of the strategy as practised by the National Youth Development Outreach in Pretoria. Mentoring appears ineffective for children with hardened negative attitudes and chronic offending as their value preferences may contradict those of mentors. Three months are insufficient to establish meaningful relationships and achieve mentoring goals. Reconciliation – a central objective of the Child Justice Act (75 of 2008) – is difficult to achieve given the absence of victims in the mentoring process.

Mentorskap met kinders skuldig aan geringe eerste-oortredings: metodes, sterkpunte en beperkinge

In die afwesigheid van bewyse aangaande die impak van mentorskap op jeugoordreders in Suid-Afrika verken hierdie artikel die sterkpunte en beperkings van dié benadering in 'n plaaslike konteks. Dit ondersoek die teorie en metodes van mentorskap en voorsien 'n gevallestudie van die strategie soos beoefen deur die National Youth Development Outreach in Pretoria. Mentorskap blyk oneffektief te wees vir kinders met geharde negatiewe houdings en chroniese oortreding aangesien hul waardevoorkeure dié van mentors kan weersprek. Drie maande is onvoldoende om betekenisvolle verhoudings daar te stel en die doelwitte van mentorskap te bereik. Versoening – 'n sentrale doelstelling van die Kinderregwet (75 van 2008) – is moeilik bereikbaar gegewe die afwesigheid van slagoffers in die mentorskapproses.

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The numerous negative factors children face – including poverty, substance abuse, peer pressure, neglect and violence – necessitate appropriate responses to prevent possible problem behaviour (Nation *et al* 2003: 449). One strategy entails offering a caring role model who can impart a positive impression on a troubled child (Novotney *et al* 2000: 1). Mentoring of at-risk children has been tailored to serve the needs of, among others, those experiencing poor scholastic performance, children in foster care or with incarcerated parents, parenting adolescents, and minors in conflict with the law (DuBois & Rhodes 2006: 647, Keating *et al* 2002: 720).

Section 53(1)(f) of South Africa's Child Justice Act (75 of 2008) supports the use of mentoring as an intervention strategy. It stipulates that a child may be placed "under the supervision and guidance of a mentor or peer in order to monitor and guide the child's behaviour". The order can span up to two years when dealing with children between the ages of 14 and 18, and one year for those under the age of 14. The strategy is part of diversion which channels children guilty of minor first-time offences away from criminal justice procedures into developmental programmes. Diversion aims to strengthen responsibility in child offenders by holding them accountable for their actions, and by reinforcing respect for the rights and fundamental freedoms of others (Davis & Busby 2006: 102). According to Section 51 of the Child Justice Act, the purposes of diversion are to encourage accountability and to meet the individual needs of children in conflict with the law; reintegrate and reconcile them with their families, the community and those affected by the offence; provide the opportunity for victims to express their views and benefit from some form of compensation (albeit symbolically); prevent stigmatisation flowing from contact with the criminal justice system, and avoid children receiving a criminal record. These purposes are clearly embedded in the restorative justice paradigm which dictates that the harms caused by the offence must be corrected, including harm caused to the family, victim and community. The criteria for diversion are that the child acknowledges responsibility for the offence, a *prima facie* case exists against the child, and the child consents to diversion.

Despite its international application and local endorsement, mixed results characterise the effectiveness of mentoring at-risk children. While a number of programmes show significant results, others have

little or no impact and some even bear a negative influence (Keating *et al* 2002: 717, Wandersman *et al* 2006: 782). Although conflicting findings could be ascribed to differential programme implementation and evaluation methods, researchers have been requested to converge on a theoretical understanding of child-adult relationships as an intervention strategy (Dallos & Comley-Ross 2007: 370, Karcher *et al* 2006: 718). This observation equally applies to local contexts, as it has been noted that crime prevention initiatives must be able to comprehend and convey the theoretical assumptions that steer and validate their activities (Frank 2003: 24). In addition, a review of diversion initiatives in South Africa found that programmes generally lack a clear understanding of the aetiology of child offending (Steyn 2005: 282). Knowledge of such conjectures is essential in intervention planning and implementation, as evidence shows that theoretically informed programmes are more likely to succeed than those without such groundings (DuBois *et al* 2002a: 157, Izzo & Ross 1990: 138).

1. Aims

This article investigates the potential benefits and limitations of mentoring child offenders in the South African context. It explores, more specifically, the foundations and resulting methods of mentoring in order to articulate what this type of intervention can and cannot offer diverted children. Attention is also paid to what mentoring perceives as the causes of child offending and whether such programmes have a possible preference for particular types of crime and client profiles. In addition, the article aims to determine the extent to which the approach has ample potential to realise the diversion objectives of the Child Justice Act.

2. Methodology

The research methods comprise the use of secondary data to define mentoring, present its development with child offenders in South Africa, explore its theoretical constructs, and illustrate the contradicting evidence regarding its impact on the problem and criminal behaviour of children. To solicit a deeper understanding as to what mentoring entails, primary data are presented in the form of a case study of

the National Youth Development Outreach (NYDO). The case study reflects on the rationale for the organisation's mentoring programme, the methods resulting from its understanding of the causes of child offending, the profile of participants, and the perceived benefits and limitations of the approach. The NYDO was selected for closer study due to its long-standing commitment to mentoring, having an accommodating research policy, and the researcher having visited the organisation in the past.

The study follows a qualitative approach. This framework sets out to understand realities (Terre Blanche *et al* 2006: 123), in this case the theoretical underpinnings and resulting methods of mentoring as diversion strategy. It adheres to an explorative design, as empirical work about the impact of the approach in South Africa is scarce. While much theoretical work and research on mentoring have been conducted abroad, in particular studies in North America, situations in the developed world differ substantially from local realities and, therefore, warrant localised investigations. The empirical data takes the form of an instrumental case study. This type of research serves to elaborate on a theory or to gain better insights on an issue (Fouché 2005: 276, Simons 2009: 3). In addition, case studies have particular importance in researching policy issues as they examine practices (Jupp 2006: 20), thus allowing to investigate the potential of mentoring in preventing re-offending and meeting the objectives of the Child Justice Act.

The article focuses on the provider-side of mentoring as diversion strategy. As such, child offenders and their parents, as beneficiaries of services, were excluded from the investigation as it was considered unrealistic to pose questions of a theoretical and organisational nature to them. A group interview, guided by a semi-structured schedule, was conducted with five mentors and their coordinator of the NYDO in Eersterust, Pretoria. The two-hour interview was voice-recorded, transcribed and content-analysed using the framework of the interview schedule for categorising the data. As is the case with qualitative research, results are presented in descriptive and textual formats. In adhering to the eclectic nature and multiple configurations of case study methodology (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 281), experiences and observations of respondents are intertwined with the case study to articulate the theoretical foundations, value and limitations of

mentoring diverted children. Direct quotations are provided to substantiate and illustrate observations and deductions. Respondents are kept anonymous throughout the text. They received a letter about the purpose of the study, how the data would be gathered, and that they could cease their involvement at any time. All respondents voluntarily participated in the interview.

3. Definition of and approaches to mentoring

The term “mentor” stems from the Greek root meaning “steadfast” and “enduring”. Ever since Homer coined the term in the *Odyssey* – in which the goddess Athena disguises herself as Mentor to accompany Telemachus on his travels as a guardian – the word became synonymous with teacher, guide, philosopher and friend (Waller *et al* 1999: 471).

In current usage, mentoring implies a cross-age, dyadic relationship between an experienced, caring adult and a disadvantaged or troubled younger person (Vandervan 2004: 95). By conventional standards, the age difference between the mentor and the mentee varies between eight and fifteen years (Day 2006: 196). Mentoring relationships are based on acceptance and support in order for the mentor to provide attention, guidance and understanding. This serves to assist the young person in negotiating life’s challenges and to foster his/her potential (Keating *et al* 2002: 717, Rhodes *et al* 2006: 692). Although mentoring relationships are generally not prescriptive, expert or overtly therapeutic-driven (Dallos & Cromley-Ross 2007: 370), those involving at-risk populations are usually structured to organise, sustain and monitor matches (McPartland & Nettles 1991: 569).

Mentoring is long-term oriented and generally takes place at regular, predetermined intervals over a specific period of time (Karcher 2005: 65). As with any meaningful relationship, it requires time for participants to get to know and trust each other, even more so when engaging with at-risk children (Jucovy 2001: 1, Larson 2006: 683). In addressing problem behaviour, mentoring minors could extend to leisure activities and assistance with scholastic tasks (Dallos & Comley-Ross 2007: 370).

In addition to classic one-on-one mentoring, alternative mechanisms include individual-team approaches where a panel of participants benefit from one mentor, and peer group mentoring

where participants share a common challenge, such as drug dependence (Phillip & Hendry 1996: 193).

4. Development of mentoring child offenders in South Africa

Internationally, and more specifically in the US, mentoring as a strategy to support disadvantaged children was established in the early 1900s by the Big Brothers initiative. In South Africa, however, the structured mentoring of child offenders is a relatively new concept (OSF 2002: 1). In the mid-1990s, mentoring was formalised in KwaZulu-Natal when Inanda residents identified the need to have older youth guide at-risk children in the gang-ridden township (Farren 2002: 32). In 2000, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) opened its first African branch in Cape Town and introduced structured mentoring as a stand-alone programme. In 2001, BBBS partnered with the National Institute for Crime Prevention and Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) toward a combined and complementary diversion service. The aim of the partnership was to provide, through mentoring, longer term and follow-up diversion support in reintegrating child offenders back into their domestic and community environments (Steyn 2005: 226). Mentoring soon gained recognition and was incorporated into the diversion and at-risk programmes of, among others, the NYDO Centre in Pretoria, Khulisa Child Nurturing Services in Johannesburg, Diversion Into Music Education in Cape Town, Usiko Youth Project in Stellenbosch, and NICRO's national Safety Ambassadors project.

5. Assumptions of mentoring child offenders

Not all children benefit from the same opportunities in their natural environment to advance resilience and personal development. Parents are generally viewed as the most important adults in the lives of children since they significantly impact on the beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and goals of their young (Beam *et al* 2002: 305). Several stressors have been indicated which distort or impede the ability of parents to meaningfully support and develop their children. These include unstable home environments situated in poor and marginalised communities and those characterised by dysfunction, child neglect and deprivation,

single and disrupted or inconsistent parenting, as well as alcohol and drug abuse (Larson 2006: 677, Vanderven 2004: 95).

Amid these challenging circumstances, children may not have at least one older, more experienced person who can provide guidance and stability. In the context of child offending, mentoring as intervention assumes that the sensitive matching of a child with a concerned and caring adult can counteract the risk factors associated with broken homes and absent parental figures (Steyn 2005: 285). It is considered that such relationships can build self-esteem and resilience, promote mental health, positively influence self-worth and beliefs about personal competence, and strengthen the ability to negotiate the challenges associated with adolescence (Rhodes *et al* 2000: 1662). In addition, mentoring assumes that positive attributes created or strengthened by facilitated relationships can be generalised to other proximal bonds and life experiences (Dallos & Comley-Ross 2007: 381).

6. Theoretical foundations of mentoring

Mentoring as intervention has its roots in developmental psychology (Phillip & Hendry 1996: 189). More specifically, it is founded on modelling which believes that children learn behaviour by observing adults and peers. It also considers that learning relationships can be facilitated to promote positive developmental trajectories (Sheehan *et al* 1999: 50). Modelling theory states that observational learning is an inherent human capacity. Unlike learning by doing, which requires adapting behaviour through repeated results, modelling accepts that new ways of thinking and action can occur by observing a single model and doing so without direct consequence or corrective experience (Bandura 2003: 169). Skills and cognitive development thus takes place by emulating the traits and abilities of the model perceived as important (Karcher 2005: 67). However, modelling does not entail mere behavioural mimicry, but conveys rules for generative and innovative behaviour (Bandura 1999: 25). It consists of four subfunctions (Bandura 1997: 89-90):

- Attention processes influence what is selectively observed of the model and what information is taken from modelled events. These processes depend on the cognitive abilities, preconceptions

and value preferences of the observer, while the prominence, attractiveness and functional value of modelled activities equally play a role.

- Cognitive representational processes, or retention, relate to transforming and restructuring information about modelled events for recollection in the form of rules and concepts. Retained behavioural concepts serve as generative guides for actions and variations thereof to suit different circumstances.
- In the behavioural production process, the retained concepts are converted into conduct. Behaviour is adapted to correspond with retained concepts. In other words, behaviour is balanced against the conceptual model with the aim of matching it to that of the retained concepts.
- Performance of observationally learned action is maintained or strengthened through motivational processes in the form of direct rewarding incentives (as opposed to punitive effects), being motivated by the successes of others, and personal standards or worth of conduct.

7. Methods resulting from mentoring theory

The theoretical foundations of mentoring necessitate suitable structures and processes to facilitate and monitor effective modelling relationships. Agents involved in structured mentoring are adults, at-risk children, and the initiatives that establish and oversee matches (Wandersman *et al* 2006: 782). Mentors can either volunteer their time, effort and expenses in meeting with the child, or be appointed and remunerated. The latter aims to counteract the high turnover rate associated with voluntary programmes (Steyn 2005: 145).

Mentors require some form of training in order to identify opportunities for meaningful interaction, provide guidelines on how to optimise the mentoring experience and deal with conflict, and establish a knowledge base for mentoring a troubled child. Training may include themes on diversity, goal-setting, problem-solving, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence (Jucovy 2001: 11). For mentoring to succeed, the likelihood of compatibility between the mentor and the child is imperative. Variables considered in this

matching process include demographic characteristics, intervention needs, preferences, interests and personality (Dubois *et al* 2002b: 29). The objectives of mentoring are generally structured around the purpose of the match and the anticipated developmental outcomes, for example, school attendance, academic achievement, positive peer relationships, or pro-social behaviour (Wandersman *et al* 2006: 782).

The time span of relationships, as well as the frequency and intensity of contacts, are important moderators of mentoring effects. Benefits are likely to emerge over longer periods of time (Rhodes *et al* 2006: 297). It is generally accepted that mentoring of at-risk children should last between six and twelve months (OSF 2002: 18). At some point in time mentoring relationships come to an end (Jucovy 2001: 14). If not carefully planned, such separation could cause severe distress on the part of the child and may negate the positive gains effected by the intervention (Vandervan 2004: 102).

8. Evidence of the impact of mentoring child offenders

Locally, no decisive evidence exists about the impact of mentoring as unimodal intervention with child offenders. In the BBBS partnership with NICRO, eight of the initial nine matches were terminated prematurely due to non-attendance by either mentors or children (Louw 2002: 40). International evidence is limited and plagued by methodological challenges. Contradicting results have been attributed to small sample sizes; relying on self-report as opposed to more objective measures; the non-random assignment of groups in experimental designs; the lack of longer term impact assessment; instruments that do not have adequate psychometric properties, and investigating mentoring that forms part of multimodal intervention (DuBois *et al* 2006: 660, Karcher *et al* 2006: 720, Keating *et al* 2002: 718).

Evidence from abroad shows contradicting results about the impact of mentoring children in conflict with the law. A six-month intensive mentoring programme with 34 youth deemed at-risk of offending and mental illness found significant improvement in problem behaviour, compared with a group of 34 youth who remained on the waiting list (Keating *et al* 2002: 717). Similarly, significant achievements in academic gains have been recorded among a treatment group of 13

at-risk boys, as opposed to the 13 in the control group (Thompson & Kelly-Vance 2001: 227). However, another study involving 13 at-risk adolescents showed that, despite significant decreases in parent-reported internalising and externalising behaviour, no significant benefits were recorded in adaptive behaviour. Positive gains were also not consistent over time, and results have been ascribed to mentoring failing to intervene with chronic problem behaviour (Jackson 2002: 120-1). In similar vein, no significant effects have been found over a one-year period regarding the emotional or behavioural adjustment of 67 mentored children, compared with a matched comparison group (DuBois *et al* 2002b: 46). A meta-analysis of 55 mentoring evaluations showed a modest or small benefit for average youth participating in mentoring (DuBois *et al* 2002a: 187). The authors noted that this result stands in stark contrast to the widespread and commonly unquestioned support for mentoring as intervention strategy.

The above challenges associated with research in the mentoring domain compound the contradicting results reported by investigators. As such, the extent to which mentoring can effectively address criminal behaviour among children remains unclear. This is equally true in local contexts, given the conspicuous absence of research in this field. In addition, relying solely on quantitative methods might not yield sufficient insight as to what this approach can and cannot offer children in conflict with the law. The present researchers consider an exploration of the theory that underpins mentoring as a step toward such an understanding.

9. Case study: mentoring at the National Youth Development Outreach

As mentioned, a case study of mentoring child offenders at the NYDO is presented to solicit a deeper understanding as to the methods, strengths and limitations of this diversion strategy. Primary data is supplemented by organisational documentation and annual reports. Direct quotations stem from the group interview.

9.1 Background and focus

Eersterust in Pretoria was developed as part of the apartheid system's policy of segregation, whereby many people were subjected to forced relocation in terms of race. The township was earmarked for coloured communities and, since its inception, has been characterised by gangsterism and crime. At present, the community continues to carry the legacy of crime, substance abuse and other social ills. In 1990, the NYDO was established with the aim of developing "... a new nation of young, diligent and responsible citizens who will serve our nation with dignity, character and love" (NYDO 2004: 4). The organisation strives to influence Eersterust and surrounding areas to become positive role models for similar communities in South Africa.

As its point of departure, the NYDO considers the family unit as the most profound influence in the socialisation on children. In this model, children and their families are the primary focus of intervention, with the neighbourhood and community viewed as secondary support systems (NYDO 2004: 5). In line with this focus, the organisation's mission statement reads: "To provide training, education and development programmes to youth at risk and those in conflict with the law through family preservation" (NYDO 2007: 1). In addition to arts, educational, entrepreneurial and health awareness programming, the organisation undertakes extrajudicial rehabilitation of child offenders through skills training and mentoring intervention. Since the mid-1990s, the organisation has been at the forefront of formalising mentoring child offenders in South Africa.

9.2 Rationale for mentoring

The mentors highlight various contributors to child offending in Eersterust, including substance abuse, poverty and peer pressure, but single out absent role models and family dysfunction as two primary reasons:

The whole point to mentoring is giving children role models. Giving them someone to look up to. Because in the communities where we live, the people who have it, the car etc, these are people who do crime.

Three forms of how family dysfunction contributes to offending behaviour are identified. First stands absent the parents: "The fathers

are not there and the mothers work. They have to support the family and make sure there is food on the table”, and “The mother is a single parent and working. She comes from work late and tired, but the child needs attention”. Secondly, and linked to the latter quote, some parents pay little attention to or are disinterested in the lives of their children: “Sometimes they steal something stupid, but the parents have lots of money. It has to do with attention”, and “Parents might be there physically, but emotionally they are not”. Thirdly, mentors are of the opinion that some parents perpetuate a negative relationship with their children: “Like, if the child wants money, the mother says to go and find the father, wherever he is, or dig him out of the grave. Things like that bruise a child”.

Service providers further comment on the impact of the offence on the family, in particular the ensuing friction between parents and their children:

The family feels exposed. Now they have to come to YDO and discuss their family issues because of what the child has done. The parents then take a negative attitude to the child.

Therefore, taking a broader approach by involving the family in addressing offending behaviour is necessary:

If you want to make sure that there is support for the child, we have seen that there is so much work that needs to be done with the parent. It's the family that needs to be worked with.

The mentors believe that such support must be provided at multiple levels:

We work with the child within the family. But with some families we must work at different levels: the mentor with the child, and the family support workers with the family. We try to make sure that whatever led to the crime can be avoided by the family.

In their task of providing child offenders with a concerned role model, mentors emphasise persevering in the mentoring relationship: “Some think: ‘Why is this person not like the others? Why isn't she giving up on me?’ [...] But as long as you continue to be there, the child will open up”. The mentors describe mentoring as “a younger brother or sister who looks up to an older brother or sister, someone to support and guide them, to help them bridge problems”.

9.3 The mentoring programme

9.3.1 Profile and skilling of mentors

The NYDO has five paid mentors who provide mentoring on a full-time basis. Three mentors are female and two are male. Their ages range from 24 to 28, although it is noted that "... it is about you being able to assist that particular child. It's not just about the age, but connecting". Patience and the desire to care for at-risk children are important characteristics of mentors: "Willingness to go the extra mile, because for mentoring you have to give over and above your job description. It is not limited from nine to five". All mentors acquired the Basic Qualification in Child Care and the majority completed this training while working at the NYDO in non-mentoring capacities. Further in-service training comprises HIV and AIDS, counselling, substance abuse, sexuality, family preservation, anger management and facilitation. Basic counselling skills are noted as imperative: "Mentors must have basic counselling skills to deal with information as it comes because much of our work is individually with the child".

9.3.2 Developmental assessment and matching

Following referral by the court for diversion intervention, the social worker undertakes a developmental assessment of the child offender to determine his/her intervention needs. Information is also gathered from parents. The assessment informs the mentor profile with which the child needs to be matched:

We look at the strengths of the mentors, because they have different backgrounds and training. Based on that, we link the child with the mentor who will be best for that child.

Mentors note that some children need experienced mentors for them to optimally benefit from the programme. Age difference is a consideration in matching a mentor and child offender: "A good age gap is necessary. You shouldn't be too young so that you can be their friend, but also not too old to be like a parent". Gender, on the other hand, is not viewed as important for successful mentoring: "We have cross-gender matches [...] Gender is not an issue for a good match". Attention is paid to the place of residence and the language of participants:

Eersterust children have mentors from that area. It has to do with accessibility. The mentor must be from that area so that if there is a problem, the mentor can go there. It is about geographics, but in essence also then about language.

Each mentor has between two and five child offenders to mentor at a time. Flexibility in the matching process is imperative:

It is not a rigid process. Sometimes we move children to different mentors if we see there are problems with the relationship. We always try to accommodate the child with whom he or she feels comfortable.

Mentors also believe that the developmental assessment sometimes fails to provide a complete picture of a child offender's needs: "What we identified as a need turns out not to be the need of the child [...] We then shift the goalposts, but discuss it during the case conference".

9.3.3 Mentoring activities

As a first mentoring activity, parents and their diverted children attend an information session: "We explain to them what we do. We also explain why we do home visits, to check on the progress of the child". Mentors visit participants at their homes at least twice a month over the mentoring period: "But it depends on the need. You can get a call in the morning from a parent saying 'I need to see you after work, because this and that have happened'. Then you have to go". As mentioned, the organisation views the family unit as important in the socialisation of children, hence the extension of services to the parents of diverted children: "Some are very difficult. Then we bring in the family support workers who are older people". Family support workers work under the auspices of the organisation's social worker:

We have teams that work with the children. They also do meetings with the families. Some of the things we as mentors can pick up when working with the child, but with some matters we get the social worker in.

During school holidays, mentors engage participants in sport and art activities. If resources are available, camps and excursions are arranged: "There is this mentality that prisons are like five star hotels. So when we go to the prison they can see that it's not. We have camps where sessions are facilitated on different themes like substance abuse". Mentors emphasise that communication does not amount to lectures. Often participants initiate contact with mentors: "They

contact us mostly after hours [...] It is about accessibility and knowing someone they can trust”.

Mentors have access to a network of support structures, including child secure care facilities and civil society initiatives: “We have outside support. Say the child is abusing substances, then we refer to SANCA with whom we have monthly meetings [...] Some things you can deal with by yourself, but others not”. In addition, mentors have regular case conferences with the organisation’s social worker for guidance and support. The social workers can also meet individually with children for counselling and therapy.

9.3.4 Time frame and termination of relationships

Mentoring relationships at the NYDO extends over three months, although service providers noted that they often request more time:

At two months, or just before they go back to court, that’s when you get into who the child is and getting to work with him. But then the three months are up and the child has to re-appear in court. We then request a postponement. It often happens. We always fight for more time.

Relationships are time-bound and mentors have thus far not experienced serious challenges in terminating relationships. This is ascribed to mentors informally maintaining post-intervention contact with participants. Nevertheless, new intakes necessitate effective termination of relationships: “Even if you want to, you cannot invest that much time. You now have these new children who need your attention”. However, this challenges effective follow-up services: “We have a need for this [follow-up], because you can’t work with a child, and then just leave him”. As a counter-measure, the organisation introduced a follow-up initiative for children who have completed the intervention. The purpose is to keep in touch with participants for a period of nine months in order to monitor their reintegration into society and to follow their development and progress after diversion. Attempts are also made to monitor whether participants use the knowledge and skills they acquired during the intervention (NYDO 2010: 9). Mentors have access to the social worker if they need debriefing following the termination of mentoring relationships.

9.4 Profile of participants

Although the criteria for mentoring intervention are children between the ages of 13 and 18, mentors note that they mostly engage with children between the ages of 16 and 18. Boys comprise an estimated 80% of participants. Offences are first-time and minor in nature, and predominantly amount to assault, theft, malicious damage to property, and housebreaking. In 2008/2009, the types of crimes for which referred children were arrested included 28% shoplifting, 17% theft, and 13% robbery (NYDO 2009: 7). Shoplifting again topped the list of referrals in 2009/2010 with 32% of referred children having engaged in this type of crime (NYDO 2010: 7). Substance abuse among participants is seemingly on the increase, especially the use of Nyaope (a potent mix of marijuana and heroin). Mentors express concern about the court's knowledge of diversion: "We had two murder cases and one for rape [...] we explained that these cases cannot be diverted".¹

Mentors are of the opinion that there is no strict profile that characterises a child who optimally benefits from mentoring: "That is why we invest in them and be there for all of them, because you don't know who you are going to win". Similarly, it is noted that "You get kids who get into the programme and they grasp immediately. Others change toward the end of the programme. Then you get kids who just never want to change". The latter type of child is described as very difficult with strong negative attitudes and those who fail to understand the consequences of their actions. Children who have attended similar interventions appear problematic: "These are kids who know the system. They really are streetwise".

The annual reports of the NYDO reveal a substantial dropout rate among diverted children. Of the 116 cases referred for mentoring during the 2006/2007 financial year, 77 successfully completed the programme (15 failed to comply, twelve cases were withdrawn against the organisation's recommendations, seven were referred for specialised substance abuse intervention, and five were re-arrested while participating in the programme) (NYDO 2007: 2-3). In 2007/2008, 30 of the 67 diverted children returned to court. Mentors

1 Although presiding officers have wide discretion in meting out diversion instead of imprisonment, it should be borne in mind that NYDO deals exclusively with children guilty of minor and first-time offences.

report that these children never attend the programme: "... there never is a face to that child". For 2008/2009, 94 of the 209 new cases were withdrawn (NYDO 2009: 6-7).

9.5 Value and benefits of mentoring

Mentors highlight several aspects of mentoring that are especially beneficial for changing the behaviour of child offenders. First stands the alternative approach that mentoring directs for connecting with troubled children: "We don't wear suits and ties, so they can relate to us [...] We play soccer and have fun with them, but we are responsible". Of equal value, they note, is the unconditional support provided to participants: "... not being judgemental about their behaviour [...] you are able to say: 'It's okay. I'm here for you whatever you did'. You accept them". With this attitude, mentors believe that they are in a good position to affect positive behaviour: "They get to know me. I live in their street with a tavern around the corner, but they learn why I don't go there". Asked whether mentoring can positively reach a child amid poor socio-economic circumstances, it is noted that: "It can, because the mentors are from that environment. It shows that there are young people doing good things with their lives".

Mentors believe that a particular value of mentoring, as practised by the NYDO, relates to services extending to families and parents. Those who welcome family support reportedly also benefit from interaction with the mentors: "Mostly parents are open to you [...] Sometimes you also become their confidant [...] They phone if the child is in trouble again". Respondents also comment on the personal value of mentoring: "It boosts your self-esteem as a mentor when you see children staying away from bad things".

9.6 Limitations of, and challenges to mentoring

Mentors identify various limitations and challenges in mentoring child offenders. An important hurdle relates to uncooperative parents: "We get parents who say that, because the court referred the child to us, they don't have responsibility anymore [...] Often the crime is because of the situation at home". These parents reportedly make it difficult for diverted children to attend mentoring sessions, which challenges the programme's impact at the domestic level:

“Having changed on your own and now you have to go back to home circumstances that haven’t changed”, and “But then you look at where the child is coming from [...] they go back to those evil people”.

The time frame afforded for mentoring appears too short to change behaviour: “You work with the child, but then you are out [...] It is once-off. It is not continuous support that they have once they are back there”, and “Three months to work with a child is too short. When you get involved in the life of a child like we do, you need more time”. A further challenge relates to feelings of despondence: “You feel as if you are the only positive person in their lives [...] I must remind myself not to get too involved. Sometimes you just want to change the world for this child, but you can’t”.

In addition, mentors have difficulties in working with younger children: “They don’t always understand what you do [...] With older ones, you can hold them accountable. We are much more at the same level,” and “I had two kids, one twelve and the other thirteen, and they were all over the place [...] after school they want to play. They don’t grasp responsibility yet”. With younger participants, mentors must have substantial patience to cope with their developmental level. Linked to the matter stands the aging profile of existing mentors: “Some of us never thought we would still be here after so many years. It is good, but it can become a problem because you grow older but the ages of the children we work with stay the same”.

9.7 Mentoring and the diversion objectives of the Child Justice Act

In reflecting on the objectives of the Child Justice Act, mentors note that the approach instils accountability and responsibility since discussion with the child focuses on the transgression, its broader instigating factors and ways to prevent misbehaviour: “The offence itself informs what you discuss with the child. If it is peer pressure, it is part of the curriculum you deal with”. In light of its one-on-one approach, mentors state that the strategy meets the individual needs of participants. As indicated, support services extend to the family, thus promoting reintegration and reconciliation of the child offender with his/her family. Regarding reintegration with the community, mentors attempt to return dropouts to school: “If the child was expelled, part

of what we do is to write a report to the school advocating for them to take the child back". Other than this, mentoring reportedly does not involve the broader community. In line with the Child Justice Act, mentors emphasise that the programme prevents participants from receiving a criminal record.

Mentors indicate that the restorative justice principle of involving the victim in addressing the offence is not achieved through mentoring, at least as the approach is practised by the NYDO. Still, attempts are made to instil victim empathy: "Because you are not the only one person stealing, people can lose their jobs because the shop is not making money. Extending it more to people affected by the theft. We try and work towards giving each crime a face". Mentors note that the making of amends is limited to the family context: "Because your parents don't trust you anymore. How are you going to get their trust back?"

Mentors are unsure whether their organisation, and the mentoring programme for that matter, can adequately address the stigma stemming from contact with the legal system:

NYDO has some form of stigma. In the communities they call it the 'naughty school', because they know of the children we work with [...] Even some of the children who attended the programme see it as a place for criminals.

The organisation is reportedly combating this stigma by offering a variety of developmental services, including art and computer literacy classes, to the community.

10. Discussion

Mentoring as a diversion strategy shows a clear understanding of an important risk factor associated with child offending, namely the role of parents as primary influence on the behaviour and attitudes of their young. It acknowledges the negative influence of community and family discord to which many South African children are subjected, in particular the lack of positive role models, absent primary caregivers (especially fathers), and the attention needs of minors. As a response to these developmental deficits, mentoring establishes a caring relationship between a child offender and a committed older person.

It is evident that mentors require training on a variety of themes in order to adequately support participants. In addition to matters that are of importance to children, for example, HIV and AIDS, substance abuse and sexuality, the themes of basic counselling, facilitation and anger management appear valuable in the delivery of mentoring services. Applying these skills and knowledge during interaction with participants, and with others in the presence of participants, may strengthen the perceived attractiveness and functional value of modelled activities. The fact that mentors reside in the same communities as participants - and thus being exposed to the same social and environment challenges - may also strengthen the allure of mentored behaviour.

In the case of the NYDO, mentors are remunerated. This strategy is valid to prevent the turnover rates associated with voluntary mentoring. It also facilitates the building of expertise and continuity in service delivery. A drawback of this approach, however, relates to mentors growing older and moving more toward a parent profile, as opposed to the desired mentor profile. While the case study notes the possibility of cross-gender matches, other experiences emphasise the need for same-gender mentoring when dealing with children in conflict with the law (*cf* Steyn 2005: 237). It can be argued that the latter option may be more appropriate when discussing matters of relationships and sexuality with participants. In addition, practice suggests that a particular profile of mentor is needed to deal with the developmental stages of younger participants.

A salient feature of effective mentoring relates to the informal nature of interactions, as well as the perseverance and commitment of mentors to the relationship. Programme-sponsored events and personal interaction provide opportunities for participants to communicate matters of concern and learn effective coping strategies from their mentors. A specific value that the NYDO brings to the diversion and mentoring arena relates to family preservation. Evidence shows that family therapy and the skilling of parents are important catalysts in addressing delinquency (Sherman *et al* 1998: 1). Therefore, the value of both family services and the emotional support that mentors can provide parents who embrace these strategies should not be undervalued. Such endeavours also serve to mend the parent-child relationship that may have been damaged by the offence. On the

other hand, practice indicates the challenge of ensuring the buy-in and involvement of some parents, as well as the concomitant inability of children to implement and sustain pro-social behaviour amid negative environments.

Longer time frames are needed when mentoring is considered for diversion intervention. Depending on the age of the child and the nature of the offence, Section 53(5)(a)(ii) of the Child Justice Act stipulates that a diversion order can span between one and two years. Not surprisingly, the three months afforded to the NYDO appear insufficient to establish trust and meaningfully engage with participants. A short time frame with limited contact could also explain the general absence of termination anxiety. In terms of the afore-mentioned Section, service providers such as the NYDO have a legal mandate to insist on extended time frames for their interventions. However, this may restrict the number of children who can be accommodated since prolonged mentoring with a small number of mentors means fewer intakes at a time.

The case study indicates that not all diverted children attend the programme. In addition, of those who do attend, some do not finish the programme which suggests that not all children who commit crime are suitable candidates for diversion, in general, and mentoring, in particular. Concern is expressed about the referral of cases which do not meet the criteria for diversion. Referral officers might be in need of training on the aims, requirements and processes of diversion. The referral of murder and rape cases to an organisation that cannot address these types of offences adds to the argument. Once a child has successfully completed the diversion programme, service providers report to the court that the case can be withdrawn. However, the case study indicates that some cases are withdrawn against the advice of diversion providers, which raises concern about the practice and future support for diversion in South Africa.

A clear profile of children who may or may not benefit from mentoring is not forthcoming, given that many of the referred children do not attend the programme. Nevertheless, in line with existing evidence (Jackson 2002: 121) and experiences with the BBBS-NICRO partnership (Steyn 2005: 230), practice suggests that higher risk children with hardened negative attitudes and chronic offending

do not benefit from mentoring. In terms of modelling theory, the following could contribute to the inability of mentoring to impact positively on this profile of child offender:

- Due to their prolonged engagement in crime, higher risk children's well-established preconceptions and value preferences in favour of criminality may contradict the values of mentors.
- Participants may have inadequate cognitive ability to transform information about modelled events to everyday rules and concepts, thus limiting the potential of reproducing modelled behaviour.
- The mentioned time and contact constraints may yield insufficient opportunity to effectively observe modelled events and, if needed, match adapted action to the model at a later stage.
- Termination of the relationship makes feedback and motivational processes from mentors impossible; therefore, adapted behaviour cannot be encouraged and sustained.

Mentoring as unimodal strategy informs and affirms the objectives of the Child Justice Act to varying extents. On the positive side, the strategy has potential to address child offending outside the formal justice system and prevents those who successfully complete the intervention from receiving a criminal record. Practice further suggests that opportunity is created to individually engage participants in understanding their trajectories to offending, which may assist in fostering accountability and responsibility for transgressions. This is further strengthened by discussions and planning on how to prevent similar behaviour. Therefore, mentoring creates a suitable platform to meet the particular needs of the individual child, even more so as participants are individually matched to mentors. Another important value of mentoring, at least as undertaken by the NYDO, amounts to the individualised developmental assessments that inform the goals of intervention. Family preservation activities (which may be unique to the organisation) strongly promotes the reintegration of the child into his/her family which, in turn, creates opportunity for reconciliation, collective planning, and making of amends to parents and other family members. However, prospects of reintegrating the child with the broader community, on the one hand, and community involvement in the mentoring process, on the other, appear limited.

An important shortfall of the theory and practice of mentoring relates to the absence of victim involvement. The approach fails to allow those affected by the offence an opportunity to express their views and experiences. Therefore, the restorative objective of acknowledging the rights and needs of victims, in general, and those directing reconciliation and compensation, in particular, cannot be achieved through mentoring as a stand-alone intervention. This shortfall may well limit the strategy's claims of instilling a sense of accountability for the offence on the part of the child. There are also indications that the very nature of diversion delivery promotes stigmatisation by the communities in which services are rendered.

11. Limitations and recommendations of the study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, in particular those associated with qualitative and explorative investigations. The research was undertaken from an interpretative framework to seek insights into the foundations, benefits and limitations of mentoring as diversion strategy. The observations made stem from an exploration of one mentoring programme only. As such, it is possible that similar interventions follow different protocols and have different experiences regarding mentoring of child offenders. They may also have found ways to deal with the challenges identified by the present investigation. While the study provides broad lessons about the practice and shortfalls of mentoring child offenders, the results cannot be generalised to other diversion programmes (Maxfield & Babbie 2009: 135). This shortcoming applies to diversion strategies and client profiles across geographical and demographic contexts. The views of child offenders and their parents were not explored and warrant further investigation. It is equally important to pay attention to the system dimensions of diversion delivery. As such, the experiences of referral officers and decision-makers (prosecutors and magistrates) and assessors (social workers and probation officers) should be determined in future studies.

It is imperative that research either confirms or disputes the claims made in this instance about the value of mentoring intervention. Quantitative strategies, and especially longitudinal and comparative designs, are needed to determine the impact of this approach. Research

should also focus on mentoring in multimodal programming, such as lifeskills training and group conferencing, as combinations of interventions could have different results. Researchers are advised to incorporate elements of “what works” in their studies. These include the classification of risk, active participation, programme integrity, intervention at cognitive-behavioural levels, and community-based approaches (*cf* Dawes & Donald 2002, Gendreau & Andrews 1990).

Recommendations to advance mentoring as diversion strategy include the strengthening of parental involvement throughout the intervention, which may require an instruction by the court for them to do so. Parents have a stake in the criminal behaviour of their young and should participate in diversion programming. The time frame of mentoring relationships must be extended to adhere to the provisions of the Child Justice Act, in other words spanning between one and two years. Lastly, mechanisms are needed to involve victims in the diversion process. Providers of mentoring would be wise to attach some form of victim-offender mediation to their programmes.

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