



Mentoring in Criminal Justice

A one day conference organised by Dr
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Report

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'Mentoring' has a long history, however, it has become an increasingly prevalent intervention within the criminal justice system in England and Wales, partly in response to the emphasis placed on encouraging communities to take responsibility for dealing with crime by the current and previous governments. Hence, the aims of the one day Centre for Criminal Justice Studies conference on mentoring organised by Drs Hucklesby and Wincup were twofold: to explore current research on mentoring and consider its actual and potential impact, and to generate debate about mentoring's role within the criminal justice system. The conference highlighted the contested nature of what mentoring is, debated what it should aim to achieve in the context of mentoring defendants and offenders, and reflected upon the future of mentoring within the criminal justice process. Each workshop discussed issues relating to either research or practice and common themes emerged. A recurring theme was the ill-defined nature of what mentoring is. Although mentoring has defining features - a one to one relationship that is intended to have a positive influence on the mentee by assisting, advising and befriending - the highly contested nature of the concept, particularly within criminal justice, was evident throughout all the discussions in the workshops.

Another significant issue discussed during the day was what the aims of mentoring should be when used within criminal justice. It was apparent there were a range of possible aims: it could be used to ensure compliance; act as a form of surveillance; to reduce recidivism; and encourage offenders to lead 'good lives' and to support them with the practicalities of doing so. These varying aims of mentoring have a significant influence on practice. For instance, emphasising a specific goal such as reducing reoffending generates a more structured and formal approach, perhaps encompassing setting tasks for each session. In contrast, a less structured approach allows mentors to undertake a 'bridging role', 'advising, assisting and befriending' mentees. The key difference when evaluating the two approaches is that the former typically requires statistical evidence to illustrate that projects 'work', whereas, the latter is concerned with capturing what benefits offenders overall. Such differences in objectives and methods make it problematic to measure the effectiveness of mentoring.

Some of the practical problems associated with the use of mentoring were also discussed. For instance, it was pointed out that mentoring is likely to be more successful if it begins in prisons and continues through the prison gate, offering offenders a support network through the entire process. However, due to the challenges of gaining access to prisons, the first point of contact often occurs after offenders have been released from custody which lacks continuity and, therefore, limits the ability to help with the transition from prison to the community. Maria McNicholl from the St Giles Trust illustrated one project that had successfully overcome this barrier and utilised prisoners and ex-offenders as mentors. Not only does mentoring begin in prison and continue after release but the mentors can relate to mentees through their own experience of prison and release, providing an

undivided support network. It was pointed out that the continuity provided in this peer-mentoring project facilitates the transition from prison into the community.

'Matching' exemplifies a further practical difficulty. It is an essential part of mentoring as it pairs offenders with mentors but raises questions about what constitutes best practice. Questions were raised about whether volunteers should share similar characteristics with offenders such as age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background. The presumption to match 'like to like' did not hold weight in all discussions. For example, Rebecca Gilmour from Leeds Youth Offending Service outlined how the different characteristics of mentors improved different skills in young offenders. On the other hand, both Jackie Lowthian and Nicola Simpson emphasised the value of a solely female environment for some women offenders. It was noted however, that there is a mismatch between the characteristics of available mentors and mentees. Potential mentors are predominantly white and female contrasting with the predominance of males and representation of minority ethnic groups in offender populations.

A predominant theme emerging from the conference was the significant gap between expectation and reality. Delegates suggested that the expectations of mentoring were too high and unrealistic. The gap between theory and practice was partially explained by poor practice; for example, when the number of referrals was legitimately pursued because of its role as a performance measure to the detriment of the quality of mentoring relationships. Another explanation of the disjuncture between expectations and practice resulted from pursuing funding which required the use of 'buzz words' such as reducing reoffending to be successful but which mentoring projects were not, in practice, aiming or able to achieve.

The aim of the day was to discuss pertinent research findings and practice. It was not intended to give the impression that mentoring is or should be abandoned rather its objective was to explore the challenges facing the effective use of mentoring, to highlight areas of difficulty and controversy and make suggestions for improvements. Therefore, the overall conclusion of the conference was that it was essential to close the gap between expectations and practice with the intention of developing effective mentoring. In order to do this, it was suggested that it is crucial to refine the concept of mentoring; to produce a definition that is uniform and has clear aims and purpose. In other words, academics and practitioners need to be clear about what they would, realistically, like to achieve through the use of mentoring by reflecting upon and reconfiguring expectations. There was also a consensus that the role of mentoring needs to be altered so that it is not aimed solely on reducing reoffending but has broader aims - to assist, befriend and support defendants and offenders and motivate them to engage actively with society. It was also agreed that mentoring must not be viewed in isolation. Instead it should be seen as one part of the system which aims to move offenders from being excluded to the included by providing a 'vision of a good lives'.