

The Rise and Fall of Mentoring in Youth Justice

David Porteous is a senior lecturer in Criminology at the Crime and Conflict research Centre at Middlesex University

Introduction

A recent report published by the Local Government Association (LGA), *Children in Trouble*, calls for the abolition of youth custody for 'all but violent offenders, drastically slashing the number of young people locked up by around 4,000' (2006, p1). Such a move, the authors say, would represent a 65 per cent fall in the young prison population and save over £70m a year. The report was publicly welcomed by spokespersons for the charities Nacro and the Howard League for Penal Reform both of which have issued similar demands for a reduction in custody in recent months and years, alongside other campaigning organizations and a number of criminologists. The reasons cited are familiar: imprisoning young people is relatively expensive, frequently harmful to their longer term welfare and largely ineffective in terms of tackling re-offending. Whilst custody should remain the default option for children and young people who pose a serious risk to others, the majority should be subject to community based sanctions.

There is much to agree with in the LGA report and I should preface what follows by stating that nothing of what I write is intended to diminish the importance of reducing the imprisonment of children and young people. However, if this goal is to be realised, as the LGA acknowledges, then there must be viable community based alternatives in place, not least because there is a considerable constituency that doubts that this is possible or desirable. With this in mind, this article discusses the ups and downs of one form of community-based work with young offenders, mentoring. In the space of about ten years, this has become an integral element of provision across the spectrum of youth justice. There are preventative mentoring schemes targeting young children designated at-risk; and there are re-integrative schemes in which mentors are matched with young people whilst in custody so as to provide a form of support on release. And yet, at a point where the hundreds of new mentoring schemes established in recent years can be reasonably expected to have bedded down, with systems for referral, training, matching and so on in place, recent research, to be discussed below, has raised question marks over its effectiveness such that its transition from being 'what's promising' to 'what

works' looks in doubt. Reflecting on this turn of events, the article revisits the context in and process by which mentoring grew to prominence and suggests that factors such as marketing and rebranding might have had a more important role than impartial research evidence.

A Brief History of Mentoring in Youth Justice

My first professional encounter with mentoring in youth justice began nearly ten years ago, in the dying days of the Major government, when I was asked by the London Borough of Camden to conduct a feasibility study into 'befriender-mentoring' (Porteous, 1997). My research combined a search for academic literature with writing to and telephoning local authority youth and social services for examples of schemes in operation. What emerged was a fairly disparate set of projects (aims, methods, structures, client groups varied widely) but what they had in common was that they paired a (usually adult) volunteer with a child/young person with the former's role being to befriend, advise and support the latter. I also came across the following account of the origins of the term:

Mentoring is a very old idea. Mentor was the name of the loyal friend of Odysseus. Preparing to leave for the Trojan War, Odysseus entrusted the care of his son, Telemachus to Mentor. The word 'mentor' has since come to mean a loyal, wise and trusted teacher and friend. (Dondero, 1997, p881)

None of the schemes I looked at had matched a volunteer with the son of a king though many had worked with the children of absent fathers. Indeed, the rationale for mentoring in a youth justice context appeared to stem from well known research (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Farrington 1996) identifying harsh or erratic parenting, parental neglect or poor supervision, parental conflict and family break-up amongst a complex of 'risk-factors' that were predictive of delinquent behaviour. A Department of Health review of social work services put the case for mentoring as follows:

Unqualified love may not be a realistic expectation for anyone other than a parent, but ensuring that the young person has an adult who listens to what they say, is dependable

and available, and prepared to support them no matter what they have done, should be a possibility. (Department of Health, 1996, p26)

The research produced a 'rich seam' of promotional literature:

There is no standard 'mentor profile' which is the beauty of the system. As a result, a pool of people have been consciously drawn to reflect age, gender and cultural diversity. What they do have in common is their commitment to uncovering the rich seams of ability and energy which these young people possess, but which have lain smothered for so long under the dust of self doubt and compounded failure. (Beginning Employment and Training (BEAT) Project Information Leaflet)

Mentoring offers at-risk young people.....a positive, non-judgmental and supportive role model. For the first time in their lives, these young people will have the undivided attention of an adult, trained to listen to them and take their concerns, problems, hopes and accomplishments seriously. (Dalston Youth Project Information Leaflet)

This second leaflet advertised the Dalston Youth Project in Hackney, North London. The DYP was the flagship mentoring scheme of the charity Crime Concern which has gone on, along with a number of other non-governmental organisations (for example, The DIVERT Trust, Community Service Volunteers, Nacro) to deliver (and evaluate) numerous 'similar' schemes throughout England and Wales. Established in 1994, the scheme was modelled on a US prototype and its first Director was recruited from across the Atlantic to ensure its smooth implementation in this country. At the time of my research, the project received over 50 per cent of its funding from local businesses and as such was seen as a model of private-public partnership. One notable feature was that the mentoring relationship formed just one part of the project which also included two residential (outward bound type) weekend courses, a college taster course, a pre-employment training programme, job-shadowing and ongoing educational activities and careers

advice. This form of delivery was termed by Crime Concern 'mentoring plus'.

I noted in my report that the project had been evaluated in 1996, that this had apparently shown a marked reduction in offending but that, unfortunately, the findings of the study were not publicly available. The project received a very positive press being the subject, for example, of an article in *The Guardian* in which it was suggested that anyone looking for a solution to youth crime need look no further than this corner of North East London. The project was also cited as an example of good practice by the Audit Commission in its 1996 review of youth justice services whilst the idea of mentoring more generally found its way into New

Labour's manifesto for tackling youth crime, *No More Excuses!* (1997). In 1998, the newly formed Youth Justice Board (YJB) announced that it was making substantial funds available for the development of innovative forms of practice which included mentoring alongside parenting schemes, restorative justice interventions and bail supervision and support projects. Mentoring subsequently became the subject for one of Youth Justice Board's 'Key Elements of Effective Practice' guides describing the 'features of effective youth justice services' and reflecting the Board's commitment to ensuring that 'work with young people is as effective

as possible and based on best practice and research evidence' (YJB, undated, p2).

During New Labour's period in office, mentoring has become a common place in work with young people identified as at risk of offending or re-offending. Mentors are recruited to befriend and advise looked after children, children excluded from school, young people on bail, young people on drugs, young people serving a community sentence, young people leaving care or custody and young people subject to an Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Programme (ISSP). The variation in projects that I encountered persists. St James-Roberts et al (2005), for example, in an evaluation of 84 schemes funded by the YJB, note differences in the age and profile of the client group, the length of time mentor and mentee are matched, the mode of delivery (in-house or in the community, one to one or in a group setting) and the type of mentor. This diversity is all the more remarkable since the projects evaluated in the YJB study were targeted on 'two groups of young people who were considered particularly 'at risk' of offending and likely to benefit from a mentoring

There is no standard 'mentor profile' which is the beauty of the system. As a result, a pool of people have been consciously drawn to reflect age, gender and cultural diversity

programme: those with LN (literacy and numeracy) needs and those from BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or hard to reach backgrounds' (ibid. p15).

Explaining the Rise: Part One

On what basis did mentoring come to such prominence as a mode of intervention in the lives of young people identified as 'at-risk'? Given the emphasis placed on 'what works' and 'evidence based practice' under New Labour, one might be forgiven for thinking that a substantial body of research underpinned its success. In fact, however, it is only in the past three of four years that mentoring in a youth justice context in England and Wales has been subject to rigorous evaluation at a national level and the findings from these studies raise serious doubts about its relative (cost) effectiveness. A recent overview of relevant national and international research drew the following conclusions:

We examined the existing reviews and concluded that research on mentoring programmes does not provide evidence of measurable gains in outcomes such as truancy or other antisocial behaviours (www.what-worksforchildren.org.uk, 2003) ... Mentoring programmes for vulnerable young people may have a negative impact, and adverse effects associated with breakdowns of relationships with mentors have been reported (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002). Worryingly, a three year follow up study of one well designed scheme found that a subgroup of mentored young people, some of whom had previously been arrested for minor offences, were more likely to be arrested after the project than those not mentored (O'Donnell et al, 1979) On the basis of these findings, we concluded that non-directive mentoring programmes delivered by volunteers cannot be recommended as an effective intervention for young people at risk of or already involved in antisocial behaviour or criminal activities. (Roberts et al, 2004, p513, citations in original)

'the anticipated chief advantage of mentor programmes — low cost — has not been realised. Mentor programmes proved to be more expensive than alternatives which produced similar benefits'

In a Home Office funded study of a school-based project for 11-14 year-olds developed by the Dalston Youth Project, following the apparent success of their work with older youths, Tarling et al (2001) found that whilst eight of the 80 young people referred to the project had a prior record of offending, 32 (40 per cent) obtained a caution or conviction whilst on the project or thereafter. Overall, they say, 'there appeared to be little association between whether a good relationship had been formed and whether or not the (mentee) subsequently committed an offence' (p61). A more promising picture was obtained by comparing the offending rate of those who were successfully matched with others but this has to be set against the fact that only 21 matches resulted in 'successful' relationships being established.

The YJB funded study referred to above, which was published at the end of last year, is equally sombre in its assessment. Whilst commenting that their findings 'provided heartening evidence that mentor projects in this scheme were successful in some respects' (St James-Roberts et al, 2005, p10), they also report that only 40 per cent of mentor matches were successful, that there was no evidence of improvements in behaviour or in literacy and numeracy or of a reduction in offending and, most damning of all, that 'the anticipated chief advantage of mentor programmes — low cost — has not been realised. Mentor programmes proved to be more expensive than alternatives which produced similar benefits' (ibid. p11).

In concluding their study, St James-Roberts et al infer that 'more rigorous forms of evaluation, such as randomised controlled trials' (RCTs) might be necessary to 'distinguish causal processes and to provide confident explanations of the phenomena observed' (ibid. p116). Their comment is indicative of a widely held and propagated belief that the RCT is the gold standard of evaluative research (Sherman et al., 1997; Goldblatt and Lewis, 1998). As it happens, the most famous and frequently cited study of mentoring to have been conducted deployed exactly this methodology. The study, an evaluation of the Big Brothers, Big Sisters (BBBS) scheme in the US is amongst those referred to by Roberts et al in the overview quoted above. As these authors note, one problem with the BBBS evaluation,

which was conducted between 1992 and 1994 and first published in 1995, is that it relies on self-report data to measure the project's impact rather than on more objective administrative records. Beyond this however, there are other questions concerning the purpose and neutrality of the study which have significant implications given that, more than any other piece of research, it claims to prove that mentoring can 'make a difference' to the lives of young people in trouble.

To be fair, Public/Private Ventures who commissioned the work make no attempt to disguise the fact that the study was designed with the deliberate intention of promoting mentoring. Numerous pairs of apparently devoted adults and children beam out from the covers of the report — hardly a harbinger of doom — and in the foreword it is observed that 'there is nothing so heart-warming, comprehensible and reassuring as an adult befriending and supporting a younger person' (Tierney et al, 2000). Within the report, although the authors claim that it 'provides scientifically reliable evidence that mentoring programs can positively affect young people' (ibid, pii), the evidence on which they focus is described in terms clearly designed to show the project's achievements in the best possible light. Take the headline finding that 'Little Brothers and Little Sisters skipped half as many days of school as did control youth' (ibid. piii). What the research actually found is that on average young people in the control group missed less than one day of school during the research period whilst those in the treatment group missed less than one half of one day on average, a much less impressive statistic than we are given to suppose.

Or consider the way in which the most positive finding of all is arrived at. The fact that 'Little Brothers and Little Sisters were 46 per cent less likely than controls to initiate drug use during the study period' is repeated four times (piii, p22, p29, p31). In arriving at this figure, the researchers 'guestimated' the number of young people likely to take drugs and compared this figure with the number who actually did take drugs in the control and treatment groups. What they do not do is tell us how many of the young people in either group actually did initiate drug use, nor, despite an admirably detailed technical appendix, do they provide the reader with the information required to work this out. Furthermore, the researchers' decision to comment only on statistically significant findings, whilst justifiable in the sense that non-significant results are more likely the outcome of sampling error, is also extremely convenient, enabling the researchers to pass

over without comment, for example, the finding that those 'minority white females' who had been mentored were 49.5 per cent more likely to start using drugs than those who had not.

One further interesting aspect of the 'Making a Difference' report is that only seven per cent of the total study sample had been arrested at the point of being attributed to the control/treatment groups and therefore the findings can have only (or should only have had) limited relevance for those interested in the effectiveness of mentoring young offenders. This detail did not however prevent the evaluation being cited approvingly in guidance notes prepared for the Youth Justice Board (Newburn, undated). Indeed, whatever does explain the rise of mentoring in youth justice under New Labour it was not knowledge that it worked with young offenders better than other forms of intervention. So we need to look for other explanations.

... the evidence on which they focus is described in terms clearly designed to show the project's achievements in the best possible light

Explaining the Rise: Part Two

Perhaps the first point to make, notwithstanding the story so far, is that sometimes, for some young people (including young offenders), in some places, some kinds of mentoring helps. All the evidence I have discussed supports this proposition and most of the researchers cited make this kind of statement at some point. In my own research, I have used case studies to illustrate and illuminate as far as possible the (really very unsurprising) evidence that a trusting, mutually enjoyable, sustained relationship between two individuals who have entered it voluntarily can be beneficial for both parties, whatever their prior circumstances — sometimes (Porteous, 1998, 2001). In saying this, I am trying to make a slightly different point to Roberts et al. when they observe that 'it is easy to see why it might work, and why it is attractive to politicians and policy makers' (2004, p512). This is true but so is the fact that whilst the evidence of mentoring's effectiveness is at best partial, its rise to prominence would not have been possible if there was not the kernel of truth in the view that it can work. The problem of course is that by the standards mentoring was judged to be a success, most other things would 'work' as well.

One can add to the observation that mentoring does sometimes work the fact that, in a sense, it always did. As Nellis has shown in his account of the 'tracking controversy' in the 1980s, the roots of mentoring (and electronic monitoring) date back at least as far back as 1969, albeit with an evolving emphasis, form and

language over time. His analysis is important because it demonstrates that one-to-one work between volunteers and offenders was promoted as a mode of intervention long before Crime Concern set up the DYP in 1994. There is something very compelling in the thought that New Labour resolved the controversy (centring around the ethics of *tracking* offenders) by proposing to get both tough on the causes of crime (through mentoring) and tough on crime (through electronic tagging). In terms of explaining the rise of mentoring in the 1990s, Nellis' analysis suggests that a significant role be assigned to the re-branding of an existing mode of intervention. Certainly the promotional literature described earlier in this paper had the feel of a marketing campaign in which practitioners, the media, politicians, policy makers, moral entrepreneurs and academics all played a part.

Moreover, the stimulation of the market in social care provision from the late 1980s onwards, in which increasingly large numbers of non-governmental organisations effectively compete for contracts and clients, can be seen to have generated a need for such bodies to market their wares. If it is true that mentoring owes more to faith in rather than evidence of its relative effectiveness then perhaps the new market was a place in which faith based rather than evidence based policy making could flourish. In a market, style has as important a role to play as substance and the fact is that evaluations have begun to show that early reports of mentoring's effectiveness were lacking in substance. St James-Roberts et al's (2005) analysis suggests, moreover, that the assumption that mentoring represented a low cost option turns out to have been based more on optimism than on good accounting. What is significant, perhaps, is that mentoring was seen to be cost-effective (even though it wasn't) which, in an era in which the Audit Commission played such a pivotal role in relation to youth justice, was an important quality to promote.

Conclusion: the Return of Odysseus

Perhaps the overriding lesson from all this is that it is important to check our sources. In Homer's original tale (circa 8th century BC), Mentor to whom Odysseus entrusted his son plays only a very minor role. The main significance of his character is that his form is assumed by the goddess Athene when she seeks to persuade

Telemachus to leave Ithaca, against his own mother's wishes, in search of his father, a course of action that leads in the end to a triumphant family reunion. The moral for community-based work with young people seems clear enough — mentoring might not work but a mythical goddess could do the trick.

... promotional literature described earlier in this paper had the feel of a marketing campaign in which practitioners, the media, politicians, policy makers, moral entrepreneurs and academics all played a part

References

- Audit Commission (1996) *Misspent Youth* London HMSO
- Cohen S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* London, Paladin
- Community Care (2006) 'YJB research finds mentoring does not work' *Community Care*, 30 January
- Dondero G.M. (1997) 'Mentors: Beacons of Hope' in *Adolescence* Vol. 32, No. 128, pp861-886
- Department of Health (1996) *Focus on Teenagers: Research into Practice* London, D.o.H
- Farrington D. (1996) *Understanding and Preventing Youth Crime* York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Goldblatt P. and Lewis C. (1998) *Reducing Offending: an assessment of research evidence on ways of dealing with offending behaviour* Home Office Research Study 187, London, Home Office
- Goldson B. (Ed) (2001) *The New Youth Justice*, Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing
- Graham J. and Bowling B. (1995) *Young People and Crime* London, Home Office
- Home Office (1997) *No More Excuses: the new approach to tackling youth crime in England and Wales* London, The Stationery office
- Local Government Association (2006) *Slash child prison population by two thirds — LGA Press release no. 090/06* accessed from www.lga.gov.uk/07/082006
- Nellis M (2005) 'The Tracking Controversy: The Roots of Mentoring and Electronic Monitoring' in *Youth Justice*, Vol 4, No. 2
- Newburn T (undated) Mentoring available at www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk/Publications/Scripts/fileDownload.asp?file=MentoringSource.pdf. Accessed 09/08/2006
- St James-Roberts I. (2005) *National Evaluation of Youth Justice Board Mentoring Schemes 2001 to 2004* London, Youth Justice Board
- Tarling et al (2001) Dalston Youth Project Part II (11-14), *An Evaluation, Home Office Research Study 232*, London, Home Office
- Tierney J.P. and Grossman J.B. with Resch N.L (2000) *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*, Public Private Ventures
- Porteous D. (1997) *Befriender Mentoring in Camden: A Feasibility Study* University of Luton
- Porteous D. (1998) *Evaluation of the CSV On-Line Mentoring Scheme* London, Community Service Volunteers
- Porteous D. (2001) *An Evaluation of the Haringey Personal Trainers Mentoring Scheme* University of Luton
- Roberts H et al (2004) 'Mentoring to reduce antisocial behaviour in childhood' in *British Medical Journal* Vol. 328: pp512-514
- Sherman L. W. et al (1997) *Preventing Crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising* Office of Justice Programs Research Report, Washington, US Department of Justice
- Youth Justice Board (undated) *Mentoring (Key Elements of Effective Practice)* London, Youth Justice Board