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Taking Care of Youth Mentoring Relationships: Red Flags, Repair and Respectful Resolution

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Abstract

Mentoring is portrayed in the literature as benefiting young people, but ineffective or early termination of youth mentoring relationships can be detrimental. Researchers have not adequately explored issues surrounding the breakdown of youth mentoring relationships. Underpinned by a socio-ecological perspective, in this exploratory study we consider the various contexts within which these important relationships exist and identify early warning signs or *red flags* that a mentoring relationship is struggling. We interviewed mentees, mentors, and coordinators from four Western Australian youth mentoring programs about their experiences of mentoring relationships. Our findings suggest that red flags and repair strategies may be specific to particular programs, and that program coordinators play an important role in supporting relationships. Our research will help youth mentoring programs work toward early intervention strategies or appropriate and respectful termination of a relationship.

Keywords*:* youth, mentoring relationship, breakdown, program support

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Introduction

Mentoring is a key strategy for supporting young people, especially those experiencing disadvantage (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Although the mentoring relationship is put forward as the core of mentoring (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes & Dubois, 2008), how to support these relationships is rarely made explicit. Thus Spencer (2007) argued that "the untold story is what happens when mentoring relationships do not go well" (pp. 331-332). If young people are not to be harmed by a failing mentoring relationship it is important to better understand these issues. Despite acknowledgement of the detrimental effect of ineffective or early termination of youth mentoring relationships (e.g. Freedman, 1995; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009; Struchen & Porta, 1997) and findings that a high proportion of relationships do not last more than a few weeks or months (Rhodes, 2002; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013), there has been little research into how to identify mentoring relationships at risk of early breakdown, or those showing signs of breaking down, and what kind of support can ameliorate the outcomes for mentees and mentors when relationships end prematurely. Rhodes (2005) pointed out that characteristics of mentors and mentees and their context may affect the quality and duration of their relationship, and also points to the importance of program quality (such as selection, training, and supervision of mentors). Thus it is vital to understand early indicators of a relationship that is not going well and successful strategies programs have used to minimize harm in these circumstances.

In our paper, we report an exploratory study to address the following research questions: (a) What are the *red flags* or signs that indicate that a mentoring relationship is at risk of breakdown? and, (b) What strategies can be used to respond to red flags in order to repair a relationship or ameliorate the impact of a relationship breaking down?

Background

Researchers have focused on mentor-mentee relationship quality to understand what makes mentoring effective (e.g. Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005; Morrow & Styles, 1995). Fewer have examined why mentoring relationships might break down. The main factors found to be related to mentoring relationships not going well or being unsuccessful are:

- mentor-mentee communication difficulties or inability to make a connection (Martin & Sifers, 2012; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008; Shpigelman & Gill, 2013; Spencer, 2007);
- mentor intervention style (St-Jean & Audet, 2013);
- level of mentor expertise and skills (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2008; Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Spencer, 2007);
- perceived lack of mentee motivation (Spencer, 2007);
- poor mentor training and low confidence (Schwartz et al., 2013);
- unfulfilled expectations of the program (Spencer, 2007);
- mentee abandonment or mentor too busy (Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer, 2007);
- meeting time issues (Martin & Sifers, 2012); and
- inadequate or inappropriate program and family support (Martin & Sifers, 2012; Spencer, 2007).

It is notable that in all these studies, researchers report factors related to mentors and mentees and how they interacted, but in only three studies researchers report factors outside the relationship. The factors outside the relationship identified in these three studies provide evidence that both aspects of the relationship and the context of the mentoring program may contribute to breakdown. In the first of these studies, Spencer (2007) interviewed 31 participants from two Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of America community-based mentoring programs. These were selected because the relationship had not lasted the minimum of the one year set by the program, and therefore the study focused on why the

relationships terminated early and on participants' understanding of the impact on them of early termination. Four of six themes identified from Spencer's study focused on mentors and mentees and included mentor or mentee abandonment, perceived lack of mentee motivation, unfulfilled expectations, and deficiencies in mentor relational skills including the inability to bridge cultural divides. The remaining two themes focused on aspects outside the relationship: family interference and inadequate agency support. In comparison, Martin and Sifers (2012) conducted a second North American study surveying mentors of BBBS programs and found that mentor satisfaction was related to training, confidence about engaging in a mentoring relationship, and ongoing support by the agency. In a third study which surveyed young people, who had chosen their mentors from available social networks, Schwartz et al. (2013) found a high proportion of enduring relationships with positive outcomes. In an interview subsample, 20% reported relationships breaking down or ending prematurely. In these cases, young people thought the mentors were too busy to meet or provide the support they wanted, or that changes in other relationships within the social networks had negatively impacted the mentoring relationship. Thus it is important to consider factors both inside and outside a mentoring relationship.

Various methodologies have been used to examine different questions about mentoring relationships that were not going well. For example, Spencer (2007) examined why the relationship ended early through interviews with mentors and mentees, Shelmerdine and Louw (2008) researched experiences of mentoring through interviews of mentors and mentees, while Schwartz, et al. (2013) interviewed only mentees. Eby and colleagues (2000, 2008) elucidated positive and negative experiences of mentors and protégés using a survey, and Martin and Sifer (2012) identified barriers to a good relationship through open-ended questions on a mentor survey. Shpigelman and Gill (2013) compared successful and

unsuccessful e-mentoring relationship pairs for young people with disabilities through an analysis of their online messages and a post-evaluation survey.

None of the mentoring studies reviewed included program coordinators as research participants. MacCallum and Beltman (2003) drew attention to the important support role played by program coordinators in Australian youth mentoring programs. This role is also evident in practical manuals and guidelines for effective practice that regard it as an aspect of program quality (e.g. AYMN, 2012; Jucovy, 2007). In this regard, recruitment, selection and training of mentors are the main focus with some reference to ongoing support of mentors to help mentors build relationships with young people.

It is possible that the research focus on the mentor-mentee relationship has led to a relative neglect of other factors outside the mentoring relationship that adversely affect the quality and longevity of mentoring relationships. In critiquing this focus, Cavell and Elledge (2014) challenged the emphasis on the mentoring relationship (*mentoring as relationship*) as the mechanism of change in mentoring, and suggest *mentoring as context* as an alternative way to view mentoring. Considering mentoring as context affirms the importance of looking beyond the mentoring relationship for mechanisms of success and breakdown. In particular, the way the program and community interact with the mentors and young people become important aspects of study.

In order to enable a broader understanding of unsuccessful mentoring relationships we draw on socio-ecological perspectives (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003). These emphasize the interdependence of individual and social processes: individuals learn, develop and act in sociocultural contexts and in interaction with others. Thus mentoring relationships comprise the mentor, the mentee (young person), plus their interactions, each of these interacting with the mentoring program (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). Mentoring programs also exist in a wider community (including schools, families and activity settings), and each of

these institutions also interacts with each of the other elements. Building on Deutsch and Spencer's (2009) model and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems and Rogoff's (2003) notion of analytic levels (individual, inter-individual and community) the mentoring interrelationships and contexts can be represented as in Figure 1. The interactions between mentoring programs and institutions in the wider community context are potentially as important as the characteristics of and interactions between the mentor and mentee to both the breakdown of mentoring relationships and to the development of strategies to prevent breakdown. In this study we explore the ways in which the multiple contexts shape the nature of the mentoring relationship.

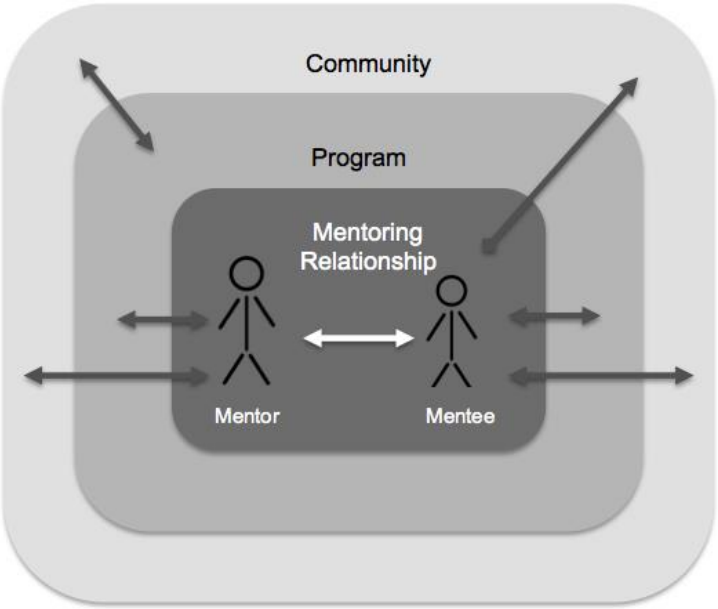

Figure 1. Contexts of the mentoring relationship.

Method

A socio-ecological perspective forms the conceptual framework for our study and the research methods were informed by an interpretivist world view (Crotty, 1998). The goal of interpretive social science is to develop an understanding of the complexity of the lived experience from the perspective of those living it. With interpretive inquiry the researcher

endeavors to determine what is meaningful to those being studied and how they make sense of their social reality (Neuman, 2006). From a methodological standpoint, an interpretivist approach requires researchers to take the perspective of those studied (Crotty, 1998). The researcher does not commence their research with a preconceived view but rather allows ideas to emerge from the milieu being investigated. Youth mentoring programs are diverse in focus and setting. Differences in focus and setting may influence conceptions of the ideal type of relationship between mentors and mentees and the methods used by mentors in their interactions with mentees. We were keen to develop a sense of the lived experiences of program coordinators, mentors, and young people who had participated in mentoring programs, particularly their experiences of relationships that were not going well and the meanings they attributed to this experience.

The Programs

We drew data from four Australian programs using volunteer mentors for young people aged 12-18 years. The sample was purposive, selected for maximal variation, to represent contrasting youth mentoring contexts. All programs met the Australian Youth Mentoring Benchmarks (AYMN, 2012), a self-report indicator of program quality. Programs A and B were community-based, and Programs C and D were school-based (i.e. operated during school time, and one operated exclusively online). In each case, volunteer mentors were supported by program staff, although the form of that support varied between programs. Differences in the focus of the relationship (person- vs. task-focused) and choice of activities are represented in Figure 2.

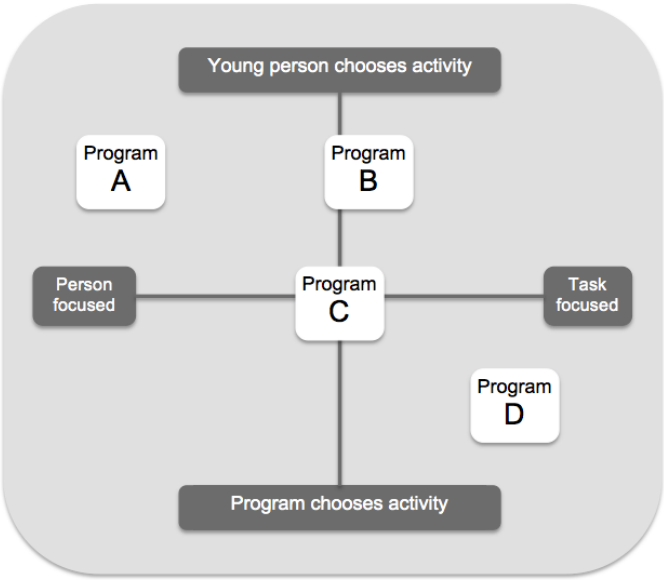

Figure 2. Characteristics of the four mentoring programs investigated in this study.

In Program A, a community-based program, the focus of the mentoring relationship began with the young person's interests and concerns and developed as a relationship that offered support and role modelling. Mentors were encouraged to form a trusting *friendship-like* relationship with the young person, which necessitated a personal relationship between mentor and mentee. Activities took place in a variety of open community settings such as parks, shopping centres, leisure centres or coffee shops. Mentors were expected to commit to a relationship with the mentee of at least twelve months.

Program B was also a community-based program in which the focus of the mentoring relationship was on the broad goal of life-skill development. In this program, the area of focus was negotiated with the young person through their interactions with program staff. Mentors maintained a supportive but less intimate relationship with the mentees. Mentees were encouraged to discuss their personal feelings with counsellors rather than mentors. The usual length of the mentoring relationship was twelve months so that young people could experience a *natural end* to the relationship.

Program C was a school-based program with a major focus on literacy development. However, if a young person had other concerns or worries they wished to share with their mentor, the program allowed the mentor to focus on the young person's concern and also allowed the young person to explore personal situations of their own choosing. In this program the mentors followed the young person's lead, and in some instances would maintain an impersonal task-focused relationship whilst in other instances a more personal relationship of trust would develop in which the young person would discuss personal issues. The length of a relationship was on a needs basis and could be months to several years, but mentors and mentees were expected to meet only within the school environment.

Program D was also a school-based program and conducted on-line during school hours. The goals and activities defined by the program were tightly focused on supporting the young person to make informed career choices. Supervisors strongly discouraged mentors from discussions not directly related to this goal. Hence mentors were not encouraged to form personal relationships with the mentee but rather were expected to maintain a formal relationship. Once the mentoring relationship concluded at the end of the program, the policy of this program precluded further contact between the mentor and young person.

The Participants

After the four programs were identified, we invited program staff to participate and to provide contacts so that mentors and mentees could be invited to participate in our study. The number of volunteer mentors and mentees was less than planned, and this has been identified as an ongoing difficulty in researching this sensitive area (Spencer, 2007) and is a limitation of our study. The reasons and implications are explored further later in this section and in the discussion.

Sixteen (16) participants agreed to take part in our study, and comprised six coordinators or program staff (five female, one male), six mentors (two female, four male)

and four young people (one female, three male), across the four programs. In Table 1 we indicate the distribution of participants across programs. Coordinators have a key role in recruitment, training and support of mentors and mentees (AYMN, 2012), but have not been included in previous studies examining the breakdown of mentoring relationships. Through exploration of coordinators' experiences of the interactions between mentor, mentees and the program and community we sought to provide new insights into understanding the wider issues around the breakdown of mentoring relationships.

Table 1

Distribution of the participants across the programs

Program	Coordinator	Mentor	Mentee
A	1		
B	2	2	
C	2	4	4
D	1		

Data Collection and Analysis

We gathered data primarily through semi-structured interviews with mentors, mentees and program coordinators in order to understand the experiences of mentoring program participants (Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008). Interviews were up to an hour's duration and were conducted at a time and place of the participant's choosing, in person or by telephone. We developed the interview questions to provide the opportunity for participants to talk about characteristics and their experiences of positive mentor-mentee relationships as well as relationships that did not work as well as hoped, and how the participants were supported in these instances. We adapted questions for each category of participant. For example, we

asked coordinators to “tell me about the times when relationships don’t work as well as possible”; mentors “to think about a time when a mentoring relationship didn’t work as well, and describe what it was like”; and mentees to “tell me about what you think is happening in a mentoring relationship that isn’t working”. In addition, we asked coordinators to describe the program in detail and their role throughout.

After the interviews we developed a summary of each interview with transcription of pertinent sections. In order to extract the themes from the interviews we employed thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed out that a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). In particular we used an inductive approach to the data whereby coding and theme development were directed by the content of the data. A modification of the six-phase process to thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke was employed. We familiarized ourselves with the data before generating initial themes. After the summaries and transcriptions were examined for themes we grouped them as (a) *red flags* or signs that indicate that a mentoring relationship is at risk of breakdown, or (b) strategies that can be used to respond to red flags in order to repair a relationship and prevent breakdown or (c) strategies that ameliorate the impact of a relationship breaking down. We coded the transcripts with sampled cross-coding to check for trustworthiness. The emergent themes provided the basis for reporting the findings.

The research was approved by the relevant University ethics committees, whose role is to ensure that research is conducted ethically and to prevent researchers from taking advantage of people who may be especially vulnerable. In addition, as school-based programs were included, the research also had to be approved by the relevant education authority. This approval is independent of the university ethics process, and the double approval process can cause delay, as schools can only be approached after all approvals are in place. Schools can

then choose whether or not to participate. For these reasons, the only young people interviewed were in one school setting, and included only young people with parental consent.

Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Research

In qualitative research there are different strategies that can be used to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the research as detailed by Creswell (2013). Our first strategy was to ensure that the choice of methodology was driven by the theoretical perspective and research questions and that interpretation was led by the data. For credibility, it is important to include diverse voices, and our strategy here was to use maximal variation sampling to ensure that we collected data from four diverse types of organization, and to interview multiple stakeholders (coordinators, mentors and young people). This enabled us to triangulate different perceptions across-case (for example, all coordinators) and within-case where possible (for example, multiple participants at each site). We cross-coded transcripts independently, so that each transcript was coded by more than one researcher. This strategy contributed to the trustworthiness of the results. The research team included four experienced researchers, who had different disciplinary backgrounds and professional experience. We met to review our findings, and our diversity enabled us to have robust discussions about assumptions that might have been less evident if our previous professional experiences had been more similar. Finally, our results were reviewed for face validity by an expert reference group.

Results

We focused our findings on themes around the mentoring relationship and when it was not going well. Interview data indicated that each of the programs had clear guidelines, careful selection and matching of mentors and mentees, and all provided preparation and ongoing support for mentors and mentees. These policies and practices are not the focus of

this discussion, but the contexts of programs and mentoring relationships are included as consistent with a socio-ecological perspective. We present the common themes within three areas: the red flags or signs that a mentoring relationship may be breaking down; the repair strategies put in place to respond to such signs; and the resolution or strategies used post-breakdown to support participants.

Red Flags

In this section we describe our findings about the warning signs (or *red flags*) that may alert coordinators to the possibility that mentoring relationships were fragile and may breakdown. We identified six red flags: (a) mismatched expectations between the mentor and the mentoring organisation; (b) the mentor not having an understanding of the realities of the mentee's life; (c) mentor and mentee not being able to make a human connection after a few meetings; (d) external factors such as changes to the mentor or mentee availability and circumstances; (e) coordinator concerns about inconsistencies; and (f) lack of support from others including parents and teachers.

Mismatched expectations. Different programs aimed for different outcomes and had different expectations about how these would be achieved. Successful mentoring partnerships were most likely when mentees and mentors were well prepared as to what might be expected in the day-to-day nature of a developing relationship. The interview data suggested that mentors and mentees did not always fully appreciate this. For example, where there was a program expectation that the relationship would remain impersonal, mentors sometimes found it difficult to reconcile this with the desire to make a personal connection to the mentee.

One coordinator spoke about the difficulties of identifying mentors' unrealistic expectations during screening processes: "… they really don't get that being a mentor is going to change their lives. So I guess you can't really tell who is going to handle that

amazing process with grace and acceptance and who is just going to go 'this is really uncomfortable, I quit'". Coordinators said they could work with mentors if they knew about instances of unrealistic expectations, but if they did not know then the relationship often suffered. Similarly, in a program that focused on developing a personal relationship, mentors could overstep the expected boundaries. As the coordinator of this program said:

> We train them, tell them how things are supposed to be set up, they run away with their idea of the program, so they take the young person out and spend money on them that they might not be able to afford or they end up feeling that the young person's not grateful or they are … spending the whole day with the young person so it becomes unmanageable quickly and then they become overwhelmed and they haven't been telling the caseworker about all that because they know that they are out of program parameters.

The mentoring relationship inevitably brings up questions about boundaries and expectations around these. If the intimacy of the relationship is mentee led (within appropriate professional boundaries maintained by the mentor) there will still be differences in what a young person will feel comfortable sharing with different mentors. For example, one young person had two mentors, but was much happier speaking with one about personal issues than the other, whom he thought was pushy. It appeared to negatively impact other aspects of the relationship: "He talks about my personal life which kind of pushes the line … kind of makes me upset".

Mentor not understanding the reality of young person's life. Connected to the issue of diverse expectations, some coordinators reported instances where mentors were not familiar with the life experiences of young people living in contexts of disadvantage. Sometimes, the mentors' initial impulse was to rescue the young person, which could place strain on the relationship: "then you're done, it's over, as soon as they can't let go of wanting

to rescue that young person the match will fall apart" (coordinator). A mentee said of his mentor: "He doesn't understand what my life is like. He doesn't understand how hard it is… I have five things at once… I have other stuff to think about, it makes it hard for me to focus". A coordinator suggested that this kind of break down went back to selection, but acknowledged that "the best screening process in the world does not pick that up like real life will" and that "I can't pick it and I wish we could".

Not making a connection. Several of the participants had experienced more than one mentoring relationship and spoke about the issue of making a connection or not in the mentor-mentee relationship. The coordinators acknowledged that this was a factor in successful mentoring and stated that if a connection did not happen, the relationship struggled or did not progress as well as hoped. As one coordinator said "people bring a certain vibe to any relationship" and sometimes "the vibe is just wrong". Another similarly said "you can tell in the first few weeks whether they are going to connect or not, some just don't". However, from a coordinator's perspective, many of the matching strategies commonly recommended in mentoring programs were not fail-safe in ensuring good interpersonal matches between mentors and mentees. Although careful efforts were made to match mentors and mentees, sometimes a connection just did not occur: "You know yourself you can match people every which way - there's that X thing that happens that you just don't take to people" (coordinator).

Changed circumstances or commitments. The longevity of the mentor-mentee relationship was influenced by unexpected happenings in the wider contexts of the lives of the mentor or young person that were not always directly related to the program features or the mentoring relationship. Although some instances may have been outside of participants' control, they flagged the need for follow-up. Specific instances mentioned were personal or family illness or death, young people changing schools, mentors with new jobs, or young

people or mentors changing their minds about participation due to changed circumstances. For example, one coordinator said that early closure of the relationship "is mostly due to illness of student who then missed the first couple of weeks or students left the school." Another said: "Sometimes things happen in the lives of the mentors as well that lead to the relationship discontinuing, family illness etc". Sometimes this may be because the mentee-mentor relationship just did not work but on other occasions difficulties arose because the amount of available time was unexpectedly reduced (for either the mentor or the mentee), even though the relationship may have seemed fine at the start. As one coordinator said:

> if [feeling uncomfortable] is ongoing, then they say this is just not the right match for us, if that's the case, if it is other things in their life that have become too chaotic … 'I've got school or I'm working at the moment and I just can't fit it in'.

Coordinator concerns. Program coordinators and other program staff actively looked out for signals that the relationship may not be going as well as expected such as differing accounts of mentor-mentee meetings, missing meetings or cancelling at the last minute, not responding to messages, or no variety in the activities undertaken. It could be a parent, young person or mentor who alerted the staff, but often the signs were more subtle. Coordinators became concerned when accounts of meetings and what happened differed, or when the coordinator had to read between the lines of what was said or not said. A coordinator said that generally people were reticent to say something was not working well "so if they are saying, it's usually five times worse than what they are saying, so you've got to detect things as early as possible". The coordinator of a community-based program explained: "The first way that we support people is by early detection and trying to spot red flags, like missing appointments, getting into a rut, they've been going to the movies three weeks in a row or something". Other signs could be behaviors such as "not responding to the mentor's text

messages about a catch up, cancellation at the last minute". Such behaviors would then trigger some action such as communicating with the counsellor (if part of the program) and mentee and if necessary "… then we would look at ending that relationship or seeing if we can recover it, depending on what the young people would like to do".

In a community program, the coordinator said they used professional supervision by phone after every meeting at first and then reduced this to fortnightly and then monthly "… but you've got to keep an eye on what people are saying". In many ways, the coordinator or caseworker mentored the mentors, and the coordinators expected mentors to be open: "The expectations are that they will be candid and open with their caseworker so that they can assist them when they reach those spots we know they are going to hit" (coordinator).

Lack of support from parents or teachers. Coordinators in all programs pointed to the importance of adults who were connected with the young people but not part of the program and the adults' role in supporting the program and the young person's participation in it. If a young person's teacher or parent do not understand the program or support the young person's participation, this can undermine the mentoring relationship. One issue raised was that families of young people matched in a mentoring relationship often do not know how to support the young person in developing a relationship with another adult. One coordinator observed, "if they knew how to do it they wouldn't need us". In one community program, the young person was collected from their home by the mentor, so if the parent or caregiver was not supportive, they sometimes prevented the young person from going out with the mentor. As a community-based program coordinator explained:

> One of the other things that happens is that parents don't get on board with the match, they won't make sure that the young person is home at the right time, or they'll try and interfere with the relationship when the volunteer comes to pick

> them up. They'll say something like 'oh they haven't cleaned their room so they aren't allowed out today'.

Families could also have a positive role by indicating that a relationship may not be going well. In situations where young people were reluctant to say what was wrong, the program may hear about issues from the parent as one coordinator said:

> sometimes it's like the volunteer is trying to get the young person to do what they thought the young person wanted to do but the young person is not enjoying it and they didn't want to say so, so they tell their parent and the parent tells us.

Respond and Repair Strategies

In this section we summarise our findings about participants' perceptions and experiences of the best ways to support and repair fragile mentoring relationships. They suggested four strategies: (a) mentors being flexible; (b) mentors being responsive and sensitive; (c) coordinators offering support to mentors; and (d) coordinators offering support to mentees.

Mentor flexibility. Mentors were often alert for signs that the relationship was not going well and took a flexible approach that enabled them to respond quickly to such signs. For example, mentors understood the importance of the need to respond differently to particular young people or to the same young person on different occasions. One mentor in a community-based program said: "The mentor needs to be able to adapt to the style of the young person. One young person I mentored came up with ideas for activities. … always text three days before … and the young person chooses". Mentors said it was important to be flexible during a mentoring session. Similarly another mentor in a community-based program had said at a coffee meeting that it "felt like there was a barrier up and she was hard to engage in conversation". The mentor then "gave her a bit of a break, just silence for a while and I thought about things she might want to talk about … so we had a few quiet moments".

Training had helped because the mentor said "I knew before that could happen, so I was prepared for the silences". If a difficulty arose during a mentoring session one mentor in a school-based program advised that mentors have "got to be prepared to look outside what they're doing and realize that their student needs help in some other way. … If they can't handle it, then to report to the coordinator". Another way that community-based mentors were flexible was in scheduling of meetings. If something important came up for the young person and they were double booked, the mentor would simply ask "what about next week?"

Mentor responsiveness. Mentors were also aware of the need to be sensitive and use active listening skills, especially early in the relationship before communication was well developed. They talked about the importance of activities that did not require too much conversation or questioning early in the relationship. Direct feedback from the mentee may not be present. One community-based program mentor said "it's hard to know if it is working. …a few meetings ago I was really thrilled when [the young person] said 'when are we meeting again'?" Continual responsiveness to the mentee was needed. A mentor reflected on an earlier experience: "we went to see the sculptures and that was fine, and then I said 'let's see what else is here' … but I think the [young person] may have been a bit bored and wasn't good at expressing that - it wasn't a good idea". Mentees noticed and appreciated the efforts made: "We muck around, then he explains something, then joke around…He allows me to talk when I'm working, I think it is really great and cool" (mentee).

Coordinator support of mentors. Coordinators were crucial in supporting mentors when red flags were identified and used a range of strategies. The on-site coordinator of a school-based program created an unobtrusive space for informal communication with mentors through setting up the mentoring time during the lesson before recess and then using the recess break to get to know the mentors better, have an informal debrief and chat as shown by the following mentor statement. "Sometimes they have frustrations that they need

to share, and they need this debrief time, and the feedback I get from them, it helps me work out what to suggest next to best support the student*"*. When there was open communication between program staff and mentors it was possible to work through issues as they arose. In the school setting professional supervision was provided by on site coordinators, and when difficulties arose the coordinator supported the mentor to explore how a session might have been handled in an alternative way.

In some cases coordinators provided constructive suggestions to the mentor, in a one-on-one situation. A coordinator said "it's our job to feed back the information in a supportive way to the volunteer so it doesn't come across like 'oh you are doing it all wrong'". Another coordinator echoed this view where something could have been done in a better way "so we've brought them in and … then we will talk to them about how they could handle it differently in future and how comfortable do they feel about going back into that relationship after they have been pulled up on something". A school-based coordinator said they used one-on-one opportunities to provide information to the mentor, perhaps about a mentee's difficulties, and encouraged them to let the student chat and focus less on the work if necessary. One coordinator said that if a mentor approached the program coordinator they would talk them through the issues and explore all avenues before the relationship was brought to a close.

Support for mentees. Programs also had a number of strategies in place to provide additional support for the mentees. For example, in one school-based program, a teacher or teacher assistant would walk with the student to or from the library where the student worked with the mentor, and engage in informal conversation to see how things were working out. In community-based programs the coordinator or other program staff kept in regular contact with the young people and parents (as well as mentors) to see how things were going. The coordinator of one of these programs said*:* "After their outings we have phone contact with

them, with the parent, the young person and the volunteer. The caseworker's job is to make sure that all sides of the story match up".

Coordinators provided mentees with strategies to cope with any early issues that may arise in a relationship. Expectations were again important and one coordinator explained that "We will generally say that … the first two or three meetings may feel a little bit uncomfortable, because they may not be used to a kind of relationship, such as a mentoring relationship". If a student is reluctant to leave class, a coordinator will try to find out if it is because of the mentor or some other reason such as when "one student didn't want to go out of class when his girlfriend was in the class, so we can work around that and go directly to the volunteer and let teacher know that … We try to give them strategies so that they don't feel embarrassed to come out". Another strategy was to propose the mentoring relationship as a trial, so that the young person could see if it was right for them.

Respectful Resolution

In this section we describe our findings about the strategies programs used to resolve a mentoring relationship that was unsuccessful. Strategies revolved around the two interrelated issues of developing a closure strategy and making judgments about future options for the young person and mentor concerned.

Programs had specific strategies for bringing a relationship to a close so that any damage could be limited and the positive achievements could be celebrated as much as possible. One coordinator said that their main goal would be "to try and rectify and rebuild this relationship, but if the young person is feeling uncomfortable or unsafe to do so, then that is that". Another said that "no matter why the relationship is ending, we try to introduce some kind of element of reflection and celebration and gratitude". If possible the mentor and mentee are given the opportunity to have closure so they can "say goodbye in a healthy, respectful way" (Coordinator).

If a program decided to end a relationship then they would develop a plan of how to communicate with the mentee and parents and what course of action could be taken such as another mentor or a different matching process. One coordinator talked about what happened if the mentor had not done the right thing by the young person because they believed it was important to acknowledge this, support the young person, and acknowledge their pain. In these cases the program staff had to do the best they could for the young person – one spoke of "damage control". They needed to ensure that the young person did not think the breakdown was his or her fault, to "try and get the message across to the young person … that they deserve to be treated better and we don't try and minimize it, we try to speak to them and let them know that we understand" - but it was a difficult situation for everyone - "that's one of our risks, it's awful".

In a school setting the participants could be told that the relationship would be finishing at the end of the term to give them an opportunity to work with someone else and "we want to find a way out without embarrassing either. Volunteers have a lot to give, we don't want them to feel bad, but sometimes they miss the mark". It was clear that coordinators thought carefully about how to approach a mentor about an unsuccessful relationship and whether or not to match them with another young person. For example, one coordinator explained that a "volunteer was feeling unhappy, feeling a bit uncomfortable. I said 'We can get you another student for next term if you want, what do you think?'" Sometimes when breakdowns related to a change in the mentee circumstances it could be difficult for the mentor and efforts were made to retain them in the program as they were seen as a valuable resource. One coordinator's comments reflected this:

> our resources are heavily poured into our mentors … so if they've made it all the way through, got matched and it didn't work out, we try and keep our relationship

with them as good as we can and give them a break and find out whether they're interested in being matched again …

Discussion

The first research question was aimed at identifying the red flags or signs that indicate that a mentoring relationship is at risk of breaking down. In our study, red flags such as mismatched expectations, lack of mentor-mentee connection and lack of support from family were similar to factors identified in previous studies as contributing to the breakdown of a mentoring relationship (e.g. Martin & Sifers, 2012; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008; Spencer, 2007). Our findings go beyond previous research by identifying early warning signs of mentee or mentor disengagement such as through: direct communication from the mentor; direct communication from the mentee, which usually understated difficulties; and communication from a third party, such as a teacher or parent. Indirect signs of a potentially failing relationship included: a mismatch between different accounts of the mentoring experience or relationship; mentors ignoring program guidelines; and the young person (or mentor) cancelling at short-notice. The results uphold the importance of understanding the expectations of the program and the participants' roles and life commitments that could change unexpectedly (Schwartz, et al., 2013).

We found that occasional relationship breakdown could not be completely prevented by mentor selection, matching or training processes. This confirmed the findings of Shelmerdine and Louw (2008) that rigorous selection matching and training are no guarantee of success in a mentoring partnership, despite the extensive literature and recommendations relating to the importance of these processes (AYMN, 2012; Jucovy, 2007; Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014). Sometimes mentoring partnerships did not work (Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer, 2007). In these instances, it was important to take effective action as soon as possible to minimize harm (DeWit, Dubois, Erdem, Larose, & Lipman, 2016).

The second research question aimed at identifying strategies used to respond to red flags in order to repair a relationship or ameliorate the impact of a relationship breaking down. Participants indicated that initial interventions aimed to restore or repair the relationship if possible. Strategies focused upon provision of support for the mentor to make changes to the mentoring relationship. This required: (a) on-going support from program coordinators that encouraged mentors to be flexible and responsive to a young person's needs and changing circumstances; (b) provision of opportunities (face-to-face or by phone) for mentors to receive regular support and encouragement to reflect on their mentoring; and (c) provision of practical advice to mentors about alternative strategies to handle identified difficulties. We found that initial training can never be sufficient by itself, and needs to be supplemented by on-going mentoring support and individualized on-the-job training and supervision (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014; MacCallum & Beltman, 2003; McQuillin, Straight, & Saeki, 2015; Smith, Newman-Thomas, & Stormont, 2015).

If relationships could not be repaired, the coordinator aimed to ameliorate the impact of a breakdown and treat all participants respectfully. Coordinators worked with mentees and mentors to try to bring the relationship to a close in a positive way. This is important as failed relationships can be harmful (Freedman, 1995), programs have an ethical responsibility to young people (Rhodes, et al., 2009), and mentors may lose confidence (Schwarz et al., 2013) and leave the program.

The programs examined illustrate a diversity of goals and expectations, meaning that expectations of mentors varied between programs. The implication is that caution should be exercised about over-generalisation from one mentoring program to another. The diversity of program goals meant that what could be a red flag in one program may not be one in another. For example, in the more task-focused programs a strong personal relationship between the mentor and mentee was not an expectation and thus lack of personal connection was not

necessarily a cause for concern, but in programs that focused on building supportive personal relationships signs of lack of personal connection, of boredom or tension were indicators of concern.

Through our research we found that coordinators were uniquely placed to ameliorate potential risks of harm when mentoring relationships did not go well, and were able to describe important early-warning signs and strategies to repair relationships and limit damage. Supervision of mentors has received little attention in the research literature until recently (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014; McQuillin et al., 2015), however in this study we found that the four mentoring programs had arrangements for mentor supervision and in some instances had sophisticated mentor support arrangements.

Conceptualization of Mentoring Relationships in Context

Taking a socio-ecological perspective enabled us to examine the role that social context and external relationships play in development and support of the mentor-mentee relationships, as represented in Figure 1. Examples from this study of *community level* influences include: young people's participation in mentoring was affected by their peers or parents; mentors' circumstances changed unexpectedly because of external factors in their lives (illness, unexpected work commitments); and coordinators of community mentoring schemes who suddenly leave their role because of future funding uncertainties. An example from our study of a program-level factor was the arrangements for regular mentor supervision, support and individualised on-the-job training. Mentor coordinators provided this and their role was central, especially when mentor-mentee relationships were going less well than anticipated. The coordinators were the people who were positioned to both identify early warning signs and take action to ameliorate the situation, by providing individualized support to mentors to repair relationships, and by working with both mentors and mentees to

close relationships in ways that minimize harm. The actual arrangements and support strategies may differ in line with the program's goals and context.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of our study was that only young people in one of the school-based programs were able to participate. As already indicated, ethical requirements for consent from young people, from their parents or carers, and from schools and education departments make research in this area challenging. While our intention was to interview young people at all sites, this was not possible at three of the four sites. Even at the fourth site, the mentees interviewed had not necessarily experienced a failed mentoring relationship. In addition to obtaining parent or carer as well as school or departmental consent, there were other impediments to interviewing young people. First, the mentoring programs provided the only access point for introductions to young people, and some staff may have felt reluctant to introduce researchers to young people who may not have a positive experience of the organisation or to past participants whom they didn't know. Others may have been reluctant to risk exposing young people who have experienced a difficult mentoring relationship to further possible distress. In addition, there was staff turnover in programs with insecure funding, meaning that some coordinators new to programs were not able to recommend relevant participants. Second, young people who have experienced failed mentoring did not always maintain contact with the mentoring program, so even if the organisation was willing to provide an introduction, they could not if they did not have up-to-date contact details for the young person. Research in this area is difficult (Spencer, 2007).

These considerations, taken together, mean that young people's perspectives are frequently less well represented than perspectives of other stakeholders in general and young people's perceptions of reasons for the breakdown of mentoring relationships are not well-represented in our findings. This is especially true for young people who are most

disenfranchised (those in care, or those from disorganized family situations, or those whose parents do not speak or read English well) (NHMRC, 2007; 2015, Section 4). Future research could engage young people in the research process through participatory methods, or explore mentoring in which young people have increased control or autonomy such as where they select their own mentors via social media. Youth-led research where young people co-design the research has been used in other contexts (e.g. with homeless youth, Gomez & Ryan, 2016) and could add value to youth mentoring research.

Future research using the socio-ecological perspective that guided our study could be used to further examine the role of the wider community (teachers, parents, peers) in shaping success or otherwise of programs and relationships, and explore broader aspects such as school or community support for mentoring and ways program funding and coordinator job security change the nature of ongoing support and care of mentors and mentees.

Conclusion

In our study we explored four different youth mentoring programs to elucidate the lived experience of how coordinators, mentors and mentees identify and respond to youth mentoring relationships that are not going well. The main finding of our research is that to understand the breakdown of mentoring relationships it is essential to pay attention to the social context of the mentoring program and structural components of mentoring programs (such as coordination arrangements). The coordinator has a crucial role as a support for the mentor, as a decision-maker about when and how to intervene where relationships are failing, and as a support to the mentor or mentee if they feel they have been abandoned. It is very important that this role is properly funded and acknowledged, so that mentors have continuity of support. The variety of types and contexts of youth mentoring meant that each type of service would need to determine what signs and strategies best suit their particular context. If the full value of youth mentoring is to be realized, it is important to identify red flags

appropriate to the particular program, so that effective strategies can be put in place to support those involved and resolve issues respectfully. This will maximize the contribution of mentors and program coordinators in supporting the development of young people.

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