

Mentoring for young people not in education, employment or training: a 'NEET' solution, but to whose problems?

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Introduction

Mentoring has been described as 'the kindness of strangers', but how 'kindly' is it, and whose problems is it supposed to solve? This paper explores the experience of mentoring for young people not in education, employment or training, drawing on data from a longitudinal qualitative study of mentor relationships that reveals their processes and dynamics in fine-grained detail. Through analysing these experiences, I seek to go beyond the superficial 'feel-good factor' that mentoring often evokes, to question the policies that shape it in practice, and to suggest that we need to think a great deal more carefully about the use of fairly intimate relationships as vehicles for achieving welfare-to-work outcomes.

I begin by outlining the spectacular growth of the mentoring movement internationally and in the UK, and the slim evidence on which this is based. I then trace the ways in which European policy has shaped engagement mentoring in Britain for young people not in education, training or employment. The heart of the paper presents two detailed case studies from one local engagement mentoring scheme that I researched, focusing on the young people's perspectives. I conclude by considering some of the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

The rise and rise of mentoring

Mentoring has become a widespread intervention among socially excluded young people over the last 15 years. Since its emergence in the US in the early 1990s, and in the UK in the middle of that decade, it has expanded at a rapid rate. Indeed, its exponential growth has resulted in a mass movement which could be seen as a social and historical phenomenon in its own right (Freedman, 1999). In the US, with substantial financial backing from President George Bush, the national programme *Big Brothers Big Sisters* is aiming to raise its tally of volunteers to 1 million mentors, working with 14 million disadvantaged young people. Bush has tied this funding to the use of former military personnel as mentors. *GEAR-UP*, a programme in which undergraduate students mentor 16-19 year olds at risk of dropping out of education or training, was already half-way towards its goal of recruiting 1.5 million volunteers in 2000. Both models have begun to develop on a similarly large scale in Canada and Australia, while student mentoring is widespread in Israel and Sweden.

Mentoring for disadvantaged youth has also become the vogue in Britain. Myriad schemes have proliferated at local levels, mainly through a variety of short-term funding sources, co-ordinated nationally through the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) (formerly the National Mentoring Network [NMN]). The MBF estimates that around 5,000 such projects are currently in existence, and the Foundation itself has almost 600 member organisations. Because of the

fragmentation of this movement, it is difficult to estimate the total numbers involved, but NMN figures in 2003 indicated that over a million mentors may have been active in the UK, including many undergraduate students through programmes such as *Excellence in Cities* and *Millennium Volunteers*. Since its inception in 1994, the MBF has received substantial funding from the Treasury, the Home Office and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). £7 million has been allocated from 2001-2006, and a further £1 million a year is being provided to the MBF as a long term grant-in-aid. The DfES is launching more pilot schemes for mentoring school children, 'looked-after' children, and lone parents and others claiming welfare benefits.

Mentoring was first promoted here by Business-Education Partnerships for young people in their last two years of compulsory schooling, focused on those considered 'borderline' for passing their 16+ GCSE examinations at grade C (Golden & Sims, 1997). It then became a central element of the Youthstart Programme, which ran over four years in the mid-1990s within the European Commission's (EC) Employment Initiative, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). In this context, it was directed primarily at young 'disaffected' people between the ages of 16-18 who were not in education, employment or training ('NEET', as they have come to be known). Since New Labour came to power in 1997, various government departments have continued to promote mentoring as an integral element of diverse educational and social policies for social inclusion (Colley, 2003a). Young offenders, the 'NEET', and those considered at risk of entering both, remain the main target groups. This has become known as 'engagement mentoring', explained in more detail below.

Given the current government's declared desire for evidence-based policy and practice, we might expect this policy-driven expansion of mentoring to be supported by a substantial amount of positive evidence. So what do we know about youth mentoring?

Youth mentoring: the evidence base

First of all, we have to acknowledge that here is considerable confusion and contestation about the meaning and nature of mentoring. As one of the mentors in my study summed up the responses of many: 'Mentoring is difficult, because no one ever tells you exactly what it should be.' However, a dominant image of mentoring is promoted, both in popular and in academic literature. Whatever particular functions it may be thought to include, and in whatever context, there is general agreement that it is, in essence, a trusting and caring relationship, and that this essence underpins its effectiveness (Roberts, 2000, Pawson, 2004). Often, the belief that 'anyone can be a mentor' is proclaimed, with the assumption that caring for young people 'comes naturally'. Explanations of the mentor's role frequently refer to the mythical Greek goddess Athene, who supposedly acted as mentor to Odysseus' son in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Her role is usually described as being quasi-parental, kindly, and nurturing, with a willingness to 'go the extra mile' in a self-sacrificing way to meet the needs of her mentee (Colley, 2001). Little wonder, then, that around 75-80% of those attracted to volunteer are women, whose social roles are tied to caring in gender-stereotypical ways. But what does research evidence tell us?

There have been numerous studies of engagement mentoring over the last 10 years. Most research in this field is evaluative, and has taken the form of questionnaire surveys. These usually measure 'snapshots' of before-and-after behaviours, linked to pre-determined outcomes stipulated by the funders of the mentoring programme: entry into education and training programmes, reduction of

alcohol or drug use, abstinence from violent behaviour, improved school attendance, and so on. They usually rely on reporting by mentors and/or programme staff, and sometimes on self-reporting by young people, both of which may overestimate positive results. All of these surveys demonstrate either no discernible impact at all, or very modest improvements for some of the expected outcomes (Pawson, 2004, Newburn & Shiner, 2005). They therefore provide scant evidence that mentoring can achieve outcomes such as re-integrating disadvantaged young people with mainstream education and work. Successes in these terms are the exception rather than the rule, yet this has not hindered the ‘hype’, or the funding, that fuel its expansion.

There are three further problems with such research:

- First, the focus on measuring prescribed outcomes means that other benefits of mentoring, perceived by the young person but not necessarily valued by the programme’s funders, tend to be overlooked. In the quest to find out ‘what works’, all too often the definitions of success are narrow, and they are rarely, if ever, defined by young people themselves. Moreover, attempts to aggregate such findings through ‘systematic reviews’ may produce misleading results (Pawson, 2004).
- Second, the focus on ‘what works?’ obscures other questions that might help us understand mentoring better. We also need to know ‘what happens’, or at least ‘what *can* happen’, and ‘how it happens’. The emphasis on measuring outcomes means that we have very few studies that give us insights into the process of mentoring, or into the nature of mentor relationships.
- Third, there tends to be a suppression of any negative evidence about mentoring. It has become taboo to discuss its ‘dark side’ (Long, 1997) and only happy stories can be told. Insofar as problems are considered, blame tends to be ascribed to inadequate mentors or intransigent mentees, and structural constraints are overlooked (Philip, 2004).

The academic literature on mentoring also seemed to leave a number of important questions unanswered. For example, young people nearly always seemed to be portrayed as the passive recipients of engagement mentoring and of the agenda set for it by (more powerful) stakeholders outside of the mentor relationship. But what might be their own agendas – and agency – that they brought to the process? And how might mentor relationships be affected by their location within particular programmes, institutions, and wider social structures? These were two of the central issues that I wanted to explore in my own study of an engagement mentoring scheme [1], explained in detail in the following section.

Engagement mentoring

Engagement mentoring has a number of defining characteristics which link it to ‘welfare-to-work’ policies (Colley, 2003a, 2003b). It is planned and formalised within institutional settings and agendas. It is targeted specifically at socially excluded young people, and aims to re-engage them with the formal labour market. Moreover, legal and financial compulsion to participate is often an element: benefit payments may be withdrawn, hostel accommodation terminated, or probation replaced by imprisonment if the young person does not comply. In order to understand this model more thoroughly, it is helpful to trace its evolution from overarching European policies on social inclusion, through to the European Youthstart Initiative that initially propelled mentoring onto the British scene, and then to an

actual example of an engagement mentoring scheme. In this way, we can see how the practice of mentors was shaped by a series of policy decisions about the nature and purpose of mentoring, as they filtered down through layers of transnational, national and local institutions.

European policies for social inclusion

Since their emergence in the early 1990s, European policies for social inclusion have been geared to economic competitiveness and employment. As the White Paper on social policy (EC, 1994: 4) put it, 'employment is the key' to social inclusion, a refrain we have heard oft repeated by the current British government. The key strategy, in line with a parallel White Paper on the economy (EC, 1993), consisted of human capital development targeted at the supply side of the labour market:

All Member States have expressed their determination to improve the quality of their education and training systems to better meet the challenge of long-term competitiveness, and to provide the supply of a highly skilled and adaptable workforce. A qualified and well-motivated workforce is a cornerstone of a competitive economy. (EC, 1994:15)

It is here that the White Paper located young people. Although they were not mentioned as being among the most vulnerable groups in society, the document stated that 'unqualified school-leavers inevitably become the hard-core of the long-term unemployed' (p.15), thus constructing them as a threat to society, rather than identifying ways in which society's systems might be a threat to disadvantaged young people. These policies led to the European Employment Initiative launched through the ESF.

Today, the same approach is being pursued within the Lisbon Strategy, which aimed to make the European Union

the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. (European Parliament, 2000: 11)

This Strategy was relaunched in 2005, in the face of alarm about its failure to progress on both the social and economic fronts. Yet in spite of high levels of unemployment due to a lack of jobs in many parts of Europe, and in spite of warnings from the President of the European Union herself (Fontaine, 2000) about the destruction of jobs by the unregulated operation of capitalist markets, it retains its focus on human capital and the employability of young people.

The European Youthstart Initiative

The Youthstart Initiative was one of four strands in the ESF Employment Initiative, and it funded over 70 projects across the UK from 1995-1999. Its guidelines encouraged the use of mentoring as a central aspect of their work, as part of a 'comprehensive pathway' approach to re-engage young people with the labour market. This was supposed to entail more holistic, inter-agency support for young people facing multiple disadvantage, but was defined in terms of outcomes relating to employability and destinations in (or leading to) employment.

According to Youthstart guidelines, each stage of its pathway approach

is associated with bringing about a *significant shift in the values and motivation* of the young people, their skills and abilities and in their interaction with the wider environment. The overall objective is to move the young person from a position of alienation and distance from social and economic reality, to a position of social integration and productive activity (European Commission (EC), 1998:6, emphasis added).

The purpose of mentoring was specified clearly:

to reinforce *the acceptance of values and attitudinal change amongst the young people* (EC, 1998:12, emphasis added)

It therefore treated social exclusion as linked to the characteristics of the young person, rather than as a consequence of conditions in the labour market or in wider society. Mentoring for social inclusion was presented as a means to produce employable dispositions in young people, rather than to challenge or change the people and practices which excluded them. Apart from questioning the assumption that engaging further with the ‘social and economic realities’ of the labour market does not itself involve alienation, one might ask *whose* values and *which* attitudes are to be promoted.

The evaluation of mentoring within the UK Youthstart projects suggests an answer. Proselytising mentoring ‘as a useful way of re-engaging disaffected young people in self-development, training and employment’ (Employment Support Unit [ESU], 2000: i), it defines a significant part of the mentors’ role as being to ‘endorse the work ethic, and... challenge any negative perceptions the young person may have about entry to the labour market’ (p.7). This approach suggests that such negative ‘perceptions’ are somehow irrational, despite a wealth of evidence that entry to the labour market for many young people in Britain is marked by low wages, poor conditions, low-quality training (if any), and insecurity in a system where employers have much voice but little accountability (Gleeson & Keep, 2004).

Numerous policy documents promote employability, but in order to understand how this might influence the process of engagement mentoring, we need to explore what it means. An explanation from the perspective of employers themselves can be found in a report by Industry in Education (1996). This emphasises employers’ demands for ‘compromise and respect’ in young workers (p.9), that staff need to ‘sign on to the values and ethos of the business and fit into its organisational structure, culture and work ethics...to “go with” the requirements of the job’ (p.10), and that young people need to consider and adapt ‘their own values, attitudes, human interactions...’ (p.10). The purpose of education is ‘providing employers with usable output from the education system, and providing pupils...with a strong chance of gaining employment’ (p.22). No wonder, then, that employability has been condemned as having ‘more to do with shaping subjectivity, deference and demeanour than with skill development and citizenship’ (Gleeson, 1996: 97), and as ‘a very utilitarian version of what it is to be a young person in contemporary society’ (Maguire et al, 2001: 199). European policies, and the Youthstart Initiative they promoted, placed employability at the heart of mentoring, and we shall see how this filtered down to influence mentor relationships.

New Beginnings: an engagement mentoring scheme

The scheme I studied is anonymised here as *New Beginnings*. (All other institutions, locations and personal names have also been anonymised to protect confidentiality.) It was run by Wellshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) [2] with European Youthstart Initiative funding. It recruited ‘disaffected’ 16 and 17-year-olds, both male and female, and all white, and provided them with a programme of pre-vocational basic skills training and work experience placements, with the aim of progression into work-based training or employment. In partnership with the University of Wellshire (UoW), the scheme also offered the young people the option of being allocated a mentor for one hour a week to support this programme. The mentors were volunteers, undergraduate students recruited and trained by the university. Some were typical HE entrants direct from sixth form study, while a number were non-traditional mature students. About 80% were female, and almost all those allocated as mentors were white. The scheme aimed to enhance the employability of both mentors and mentees, since the students were expected to develop improved communication skills, and to utilise the experience in their CVs for entry into the graduate labour market.

In its design, *New Beginnings* had to fulfil the funding criteria for the Youthstart Initiative, which, as we have already seen, sought to integrate disaffected young people into the formal labour market. Most young people arrived at the scheme when they tried to claim unemployment benefits. Under welfare legislation, they were denied benefits on the basis that they could get a £45 a week training allowance by participating in *New Beginnings*, and – since it was supposed to be designed for disadvantaged young people – the expectation was that all of them should join this scheme. Because a buoyant labour market combined locally with high staying-on rates in school sixth forms, Wellshire employers were experiencing difficulty in filling vacancies at the bottom end of the labour market, and meeting this need was an explicit element of the scheme’s rationale. So the main occupational areas in which the young people were placed were: hairdressing, care of the elderly, retail and basic clerical work (mainly undertaken by young women); unskilled work such as cleaning, packing, and labouring; and the less skilled areas of motor vehicle and building work (mainly undertaken by young men).

Progression from *New Beginnings* to other work-based training schemes would help the TEC meet other quantitative targets it had to achieve. As the *New Beginnings* line manager, often told me, ‘We’re in the business of training and employment’. Another senior manager, responsible for all the TEC’s youth programmes, outlined her definition of the role she hoped *New Beginnings* mentors would play:

Mentoring was about befriending, and helping us, perhaps using a different way of talking to the young person, to help that young person to see what we were trying to get...trying to help them with. So the focus was very clearly about getting them into employment. That was very clear, that that’s what the mentoring process was about.

The training course for the mentors had an input equivalent to four full days, similar to that for a module on a degree course, well in excess of the few hours training provided for volunteer mentors in many such schemes (cf. Skinner & Fleming, 1999). The training manual which accompanied the course was dominated by the idea that the mentors’ main goal was to help get the young people into

employment. It posed the overall aims of mentoring within the scheme in this instrumentalist way:

What is the purpose of education and training? ... Primarily education and training can lead to a particular role within the workforce.

Each section of the manual ended with a summary definition of the mentors' role in the context of employment-related goals. Mentors 'could make a difference to the [local] unemployment figures'; 'your aim is to encourage and promote the worth of training'; 'your role as Mentor is to encourage the minimisation of disaffection'. They were supposed to help young people develop the key skills 'that make them attractive to the workforce', and to change the attitudes of young people who 'do not wish to conform to the values and expectations that society upholds with reference to employment and training.' (Once again, we might question *whose* values and expectations are here represented as those of 'society' in general.) Conversations in mentoring sessions were expected to focus on discussion of the training action plan, drawn up for the young person by *New Beginnings* staff each week. The training course itself helped to underline this key requirement for mentors to encourage the young person to accept the discipline of the workplace, and work towards the training and employment outcomes expected of them.

New Beginnings was thus located within the model of engagement mentoring: it tied mentoring to employment-related goals; it sought to transform young people's dispositions in line with dominant concepts of employability; and it treated the mentors as vehicles for these objectives. This returns us, however, to one of the questionable assumptions underpinning mentoring research and practice: that young people are viewed as passive recipients of the mentoring process. Let us see, then, the extent to which the young people participating in the research at *New Beginnings* exercised any agency in their mentor relationships, and the outcomes that resulted. Here I focus on just two of the young people, but their stories, though unique in many ways, are typical of the mentees I interviewed in respect of the way they brought their own agendas to mentor relationships, and how these played out in relation to the agenda set by the scheme. It is important to note here that those who decided to take up the mentoring option were not young people who were harshly alienated from education and training, but fairly accepting of the aims of *New Beginnings*. They were the most compliant and willing to engage with the training-related elements of its broader programme.

Annette's story: doing the right thing?

Annette was nearly 18 when I met her. She was working hard on completing her NVQ Level 1 in business administration, and *New Beginnings* staff were so pleased with her ability and commitment that they had provided her with a work placement as clerical receptionist in the scheme's own office. Had she been staying on, the scheme's manager said she would have created a permanent post for her, but Annette was expecting her first child, and was due to leave a month later. The pregnancy was planned, she was living with her steady boyfriend, and starting a family meant a great deal to Annette, given her own personal history.

Annette's mother had died when she was just six years old, and as she grew up, conflicts arose with her father, and he eventually put her into local authority care. She was separated from her brothers and sisters, to whom she had been very close. She described this as the start of a period of rebellion for her, in which she had begun

to truant from school, and which she now regretted. Having tried to claim unemployment benefits, she was told that she had to be 'on a scheme' and was sent, reluctantly at first, to *New Beginnings*, but soon settled in. She was determined to make up for lost time, to gain a qualification, and in particular to show her father that she was capable of achieving something worthwhile:

I'm sticking to this now, even though sometimes I'm fed up with it, I always think: well, I went wrong at school and I've regretted that, then one day I'll have my NVQ in Business Admin, I've got it then, haven't I? And that's something I wouldn't mess up. I messed up at school and, like, my dad always used to say that all my brothers and sisters would just be the same, we won't get nothing out of life, so I've got to achieve something.

Annette had a clear plan of how she would pursue this goal, despite having had considerable time off sick because of problems with her pregnancy:

If I don't get my NVQ done within this three and a half weeks, I'll come in for odd days and finish it off, like, when I leave. It's nearly all finished, I've just got three units to do now.

Annette's mentor, Jane, a mature student, had been allocated to her because of her background in business administration, but Annette liked her because she also had a small child. Nevertheless, Annette's name never appeared on the large whiteboard in the office that showed mentor-mentee matches, nor were the records of her mentor meetings in the scheme's files. I wondered if Annette used her position at the *New Beginnings* scheme to erase any signs that she had a mentor, and if this was because the young people felt some stigma attached to mentoring.

Jane told me how Annette would use their mentoring meetings each week to discuss her past family life, her pregnancy, and problems at home, and to ask for reassurance and advice. She also recounted her initial efforts to put into practice the mentor training and *New Beginnings* guidelines:

I'd worked with Annette for a few weeks, then I went back to read the training manual to see if I was doing it right. We'd got into talking about her pregnancy, her background, what had happened with her mum, her dad, social workers. I had to think: am I on the right lines here? And the manual tells you about this plan they have, their timetable, and it says you should work with that with the mentee every week. So I asked her for it, and she was shocked! I asked her to bring it in the next week so we could look at it together. But she never has. The manual says you are supposed to. She brought her hospital planner in instead, and she brings that every week.

Jane never asked for the *New Beginnings* planner again, and identifies this as the moment when she felt Annette 'really began to trust me'.

Here, the two planners stand as graphic symbols of two alternate agendas for this mentor relationship. Annette felt confident in the progress of her training, and sought support for personal questions and difficulties, not having a mother of her own to turn to: she set the agenda for mentoring on her own terms from the start. When Jane realised this did not match the approach determined by *New Beginnings*, she attempted to re-orient the agenda by demanding Annette's training planner. But

Annette defied this instruction and re-asserted her own needs, bringing her maternity clinic planner instead. Though she embraced the short-term goals of the scheme as part of her immediate plans, she was indeed resisting them as the focus of her mentor relationship. The planner that gets brought to the meeting is a physical symbol of Annette's agency, and its assertion in the mentoring process. Both mentor and mentee felt that the relationship had been successful, although no trace

Annette completed her NVQ Level 1, to her delight, and then left *New Beginnings* to have her baby. She and Jane were allowed, in an exception to the scheme's strict rules, to continue seeing each other, but Annette gradually let the relationship drop. She was getting support with the baby from her health visitor and her local clinic, as well as from her sisters and aunts, and was developing a social network of other young mothers in her neighbourhood. At our second interview, she appeared to be a very happy and competent young mother, proud of her baby and of her neat and tidy council house. She had no plans to return to work until her child started school. Having been placed in care herself, she felt very strongly that 'a child needs its mother when it's young'. Unfortunately, Annette would probably register as a failure and as continuing problem within the framework outlined in UK social inclusion policies, where teenage pregnancy is constructed in a way that is often reminiscent of Charles Murray's tirades (1990) against the 'underclass'.

Adrian's story: hitting the target but missing the point?

Adrian came to *New Beginnings* at the age of 17, having been a 'schoolphobic'. He had also suffered from depression and anxiety, agoraphobia and an eating disorder during his adolescence. He lived at home with his mother, and their relationship was often difficult. Adrian described his post-16 choice as a stark one: between coming to *New Beginnings* or committing suicide. He found it very difficult to relate to his peers, and had requested an older woman as a mentor. The staff therefore matched him with Patricia. In her mid-30s, Pat had been a personnel manager in a large business, she was now a student teacher, and Adrian talked extremely warmly about the relationship he had established with her. Her support had enabled him to grow tremendously in confidence and self-esteem:

To be honest, I think anyone who's in my position, who has problems with meeting people, being around people even, I think a mentor is one of the greatest things you can have. I'd tell any young person to have a mentor... What Pat has done for me is, you know, it's just to turn me around and give me positive thoughts... If I wouldn't have had Pat, I think I'd still have the problems at home... You know, she's put my life in a whole different perspective.

Adrian's ambition was to train to work with computers, although he was not sure exactly what this would involve. However, he was placed in a clerical post that involved only basic duties such as filing. Only 13 weeks after he started at the scheme, the placement officer who supervised the young people told me that she had sacked him. Since *New Beginnings* was designed to prepare young people for employment, it had strict rules about lateness and absence, and Adrian had broken the rules at his placement. He had provided excuses such as a grandfather's funeral and a dental appointment on each occasion, but staff had waited in their cars outside the crematorium and the dental surgery to ascertain that Adrian had not in fact turned up.

Adrian told me that, although he knew he was in the wrong to take time off with fake excuses, he had become frustrated and demoralised in his placement:

The first day I went, I got filing, but the thing is, is that there's five different types of filing, and my interest was in computers, and now I understand that filing is an important job, isn't it? In an office, someone's got to do it, but the thing is, from nine o'clock in the morning till five, I was filing all day, and I was doing it every day, and it got to Monday night and I thought, what is the point, you know? I'm not doing anything on computers, I'm not doing what I want, I'm filing...

He felt his depression creeping on again, and some days he simply could not face going to work. He discussed the problem with Pat, who advised him to ask his placement supervisor to let him do some different tasks. Although he did so, he was told that he would have to carry on doing filing all the time.

Pat supported Adrian's modest ambitions to work with computers, and felt that this situation was unfair. But her experience as former personnel manager and as a student teacher gave her a different perspective on the problem. She suspected that there was more to his dread of filing than plain boredom. Adrian had told her how confusing he found the alphabetical and numerical filing systems he had to use, and how he had been so afraid of making mistakes that he did the work very slowly and carefully, but had been told off for this, to his distress. Pat was concerned that unidentified learning difficulties were at the root of the problem, and she tried to advocate on his behalf with the New Beginnings staff, but to no avail.

The New Beginnings placement officer had her own perspective on the situation. She had seen how Adrian had grown in confidence, and took his breach of the attendance regulations as a further indication that he no longer needed the individual support that New Beginnings was supposed to provide. Her feeling was that he had been 'swinging the lead' and 'didn't really want to work'. Such behaviour threatened the scheme's relations with local employers, and undermined her hard work to obtain placements. She therefore sacked him. However, Adrian was not officially recorded as having been dismissed from the scheme. He was offered a place to start a month later at a mainstream 'job club' also run by the TEC. This meant that he would lose his income for a month, and would then only receive an allowance of £20 a week. In this way, he was recorded as an outcome of positive progression, with the implication that his problems had been solved by his participation in New Beginnings. This might be regarded as a prime example of such schemes 'hitting the target, but missing the point' (Williamson, 2005).

The greatest blow for Adrian was that his dismissal abruptly ended his contact with Pat in a kind of double punishment, since *New Beginnings'* rules strictly forbade mentors and mentees from keeping in touch once young people left the scheme. His feelings were understandably strong:

That was an unhappy time for me, you know, to be just cut off, just to be severed away from someone who you explain to and talk to and poured out your heart to, and I was very angry, to be honest.

One year later, he was still unemployed after a number of brief false starts at the job club and on other schemes. Now over 18, he was anxious about his future, and saw 'time running out' as he passed the age limit of all the transitional support

available. A careers adviser had been helping him, but she had explained that he would soon no longer be eligible for her support. However, he still identified the mentoring he had undertaken at *New Beginnings* as a very positive experience, and he had put that experience to use in his subsequent placements:

I think now I will attach to somebody, one person, you know, and I'll attach to them. You see that person, and you think, 'Yes, I'll hang around with her or him'.

Adrian's story shows how a constructive relationship with an independent adult mentor created a dramatic turning point in his life. It helped him cope with mental illness and improve family relationships, encouraged his career aspirations, and motivated him to gain new skills and knowledge related to new technology. However, it was that very transformation of his attitudes, values, and beliefs that took him beyond the pale of the restrictive vocational training opportunities reserved for the young people in the *New Beginnings* scheme. His dispositions were altered by mentoring, but not fast enough, and not in a way that fitted the scheme's policy- and employer-driven prescriptions. This in turn resulted in his further exclusion from the education and training system – surely a failure snatched from the jaws of success in a programme purportedly designed to promote social inclusion for young people like Adrian.

Mentoring socially excluded young people: some conclusions

Without exception, none of the young people who took part in this research wanted their mentor relationship to be focused primarily on the goals set by *New Beginnings*. Adrian perhaps comes closer than any to the ideal of the scheme, in seeking regular support from his mentor on training issues. But even for him, the relationship was much more important in helping him cope with significant personal difficulties in his transition to adulthood. By the time *New Beginnings*' two-year funding came to an end, most of the adult stakeholders – staff at WellTEC and at UoW, and the mentors – had lost faith in the mentoring process. However, all of the young mentees were positive about its benefits, though some were more enthusiastic than others. They directed their efforts to making the most of mentoring, while setting their own terms within mentor relationships. They valued relationships which they had chosen and negotiated themselves, on the basis of their own needs and concerns.

The contradiction of engagement mentoring is that the very benefits mentees gained – confidence, raised aspirations, support to pursue deeply-held personal values – once again placed them beyond the narrow boundaries of 'social inclusion', defined as low-level employment, within the context of the *New Beginnings* scheme. A number, like Adrian, were re-excluded from the scheme with dire individual consequences: an unintended but counterproductive outcome. All too often, it seemed that mentoring had been constructed as a solution to the problems of government, agencies and employers – dealing with the 'NEET' group – rather than as a solution to the problems disadvantaged young people faced themselves. Does this mean that mentoring itself does not 'work'? Here we need to be careful not to throw babies out with bathwater.

Firstly, we should remember that engagement mentoring is not the only model of mentoring available. This is easy to forget when it is the model that predominates in policy thinking and that therefore attracts funding most easily. However, Kate Philips' work (1997) shows that a broad range of models could be adopted, including

highly informal, unplanned relationships, as well as less formal *styles* of mentoring with planned programmes. In a recent study of mentoring for Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (Philip et al, 2004) in three different settings – a housing project and an education project for excluded young people, with paid keyworkers as mentors, and a community scheme with volunteer mentors – she also found that young people valued mentoring as a positive experience, particularly in helping them to come to terms with difficult family relationships. They wanted relationships to continue on an informal and occasional basis beyond the formal mentoring intervention, and they most valued relationships with mentors who shared similar backgrounds and experiences and were prepared to relate to them on a less formal level. Moreover, many young people in the NEET group, like most of those in my small sample, have mental health problems (Britton et al, 2002). There are important questions to be asked about the appropriateness of engagement mentoring for these young people, and about the long-term negative effects of ruptured mentor relationships for them.

Secondly, we should remember that mentor relationships are fragile – certainly when we consider the weighty outcomes they are supposed to produce in engagement mentoring. The JRF study confirmed that, when mentor relationships ended abruptly or through young people being re-excluded from the projects, as in Adrian's case, this could undermine the benefits perceived by mentees and reinforce their feelings of rejection. Philip et al (2004) note that mentoring can be a useful element in a range of helping interventions, but cannot be a magic bullet that solves all the ills of social exclusion. An 'explanatory review' of 10 major studies of engagement mentoring (Pawson, 2004) showed that mentor relationships are complicated, and often encounter crises and collapse. The synthesised research evidence shows that mentoring works best on the simple level of befriending, and is less effective in meeting target-driven goals. It is therefore important to avoid over-expectations of what mentor relationships can achieve, particularly for young people faced with social exclusion:

Close relationships, even ones voluntarily and graciously proffered, cannot sweep away the institutional and structural forces that hold sway over young people's lives. (Pawson & Boaz, 2004)

In this context, we can judge that it is important to avoid blaming those involved in mentoring – scheme staff, mentors, or mentees themselves – when things go wrong.

Thirdly, we need to be aware that any intervention focused on changing the young person to fit the needs, desires and concerns of educational systems and the labour market begs a question that it simultaneously obscures: what should we be doing to change educational systems and the labour market to fit the needs, desires, and concerns of young people? Here, Pawson's (2004) review argues that mentoring has to be backed up by high-level professional interventions such as youth work, guidance, suitable education and training etc. We also need to think about the ways in which such interventions can be geared more to young people's needs, and to creating change in institutions and structures – not to mention the regulatory actions in respect of the labour market itself that government could take, if there were the political determination to do so.

I have argued in detail elsewhere (Colley, 2003a) that policy-makers and practitioners need to consider a range of other responses to young people excluded from education, training and the labour market. 'Hard' policy interventions could be

used to increase the youth training allowance to sensible levels, legislate more effectively against inequalities in the labour market, and ensure that employers are obliged to provide high-quality training opportunities. Mentoring practice could be developed through encouraging more critical reflective practice among staff and volunteers; by overcoming the atomising effect of individual mentoring, for both mentors and mentees; by developing better theoretical and evidence bases; by acknowledging power relations in mentoring and its contexts; by giving young people more of a voice in mentoring; and by allowing their existing knowledge, networks and desires to count for something, rather than dismissing them as ‘part of the problem’.

While ever we continue to take an approach of using mentoring to shoe-horn our most vulnerable young people into what we care to offer them, and do so in the name of a warm and compassionate human relationship, we run the very real risk of offering them only a stone in exchange for bread.

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