

Can occupational therapy methods support voluntary befrienders to develop meaningful relationships with young people?

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Abstract

The overall aim of this literature review is to explore literature based on the befriending and mentoring relationships and evaluate the evidence base for this topic. The literature reviewed focuses on different aspects of the mentoring relationship and takes into account perspectives from all parties involved (i.e. mentor, mentee, family, service managers etc.).

Whilst searching from literature, the term 'Befriending' yielded no relevant results. However, befriending and mentoring coexist on the same spectrum and often befriending relationships develop into mentoring relationships. The role of a befriender is to provide informal social support (The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2006). The transition from befriending to mentoring occurs when the befriender works with the befriender to achieve personal goals or ambitions (The Scottish mentoring Network, 2009). Therefore, similar terms such as 'mentoring' and 'support' were used when searching for literature to increase the relevance of the results.

Keywords

Befriending, mentoring, young people, occupational therapy, development of meaningful relationships

Key Points

- Forming a connection is an essential factor in building befriending relationships
- Commitment to the relationship is essential from both the young person and befriender
- Service coordinators play a crucial role in supporting befriending relationships
- Support from schools and families can impact the befriending relationship
- Carefully planned relationship endings are essential in preserving the progress made throughout the befriending relationship.
- Unplanned or informal relationship endings can affect both the young person and their family

Background

Following the release of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014) and the 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) policy (The Scottish Government, 2019), the need to support and safeguard the wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland has become a major focus. In 2018, the Scottish Government published a paper outlining the current health and wellbeing of children in Scotland. It revealed that only 6 in 10 pupils report having positive peer relationships (The Scottish Government, 2018). People Know How is a charity organisation in Edinburgh, who have developed a 'Positive Transitions Service'. This service includes a befriending service, which offers one-to-one support to young people who are experiencing issues such as, low self-esteem, difficulty maintaining positive relationships and disengaging from school (PKH, 2019). Through weekly sessions, befrienders provide support and enable young people to overcome these barriers, ultimately contributing to improvement of their health and wellbeing

The befriender supports the befriended to overcome barriers to learning and to help them to have a more positive school experience (PKH, 2019). This is done through making use of common interests and engaging in activities aimed at tackling some of the key issues the young person is experiencing. Occupational therapists use activities and meaningful occupations as a therapeutic tool to support the health and wellbeing of the people they work with (Drew and Rugg, 2001). They have a unique skill base which allows them to analyse, assess and evaluate the use of activity as a form

of intervention. Therefore, occupational therapists are in a prime position to educate befrienders on the importance of activity, and how best to use it to support the young people they work with.

Currently within academia there is no evidence to support occupational therapy input within befriending services. Moreover, the aim of the project is to explore how core skills of occupational therapy can be utilised by befrienders to better support and develop their relationships with the young people they work with. To do this, a literature review was first carried out to explore the current evidence surrounding befriending relationships with young people. This revealed that there are currently some common issues experienced within youth befriending relationships, such as match quality, the input of others and relationship closures.

Findings

1. Relationship strength based on match quality

Four of the seven articles reviewed commented on the importance of the matching process between mentee and mentor and how good quality matches resulted in greater impact and longevity in mentoring relationships (Spencer et al., 2017; Mtika and Payne, 2014; MacCallum et al., 2017 and Washington, 2015).

The study by McCallum et al. (2017), explored the indicators of mentoring relationship break-downs and the strategies that could be employed to repair these relationships. They identified six 'red flags', one of which was the lack of mentor-mentee connection due to mismatched pairing.

Although the findings of this research are useful in revealing factors which influence relationship breakdowns and the different strategies that can be implemented to support relationships, there are limitations to this study. There are many different types of mentoring programs that vary in terms of how and where they provide support (i.e. community or school based, program or person led, task based or person focused etc.). In order to understand the different types of relationship breakdowns and solutions that can be used, the researchers explained that they employed a purposive sampling technique to ensure maximum variation and representation of contrasting mentoring contexts (MacCallum et al., 2017). Although this was attempted, it was not achieved. There was an uneven representation of coordinators, mentors and mentees, with all mentee participants coming from the same mentoring program. This was put down to difficulty obtaining informed consent from parents/guardian for young people to take part.

A challenge of purposive sampling is ensuring that findings are generalisable. Based on the subjective nature in which participants are selected, it can be difficult to define the representativeness of the study sample (Sharma, 2017). Therefore, the credibility of this research is jeopardised by the small sample size and lack of diversity in participants.

This issue is something that was also experienced in the study by Spencer et al. (2017). Their study looked at mentoring relationships and the connections between how and why they end. They only recruited participants in the North-East of America, who were part of the

'Big Brothers Big Sisters of America' community mentoring program. Therefore, these findings may not be applicable to other mentoring contexts, based on the fact they only reviewed community mentoring programs run by the same service and all participants were from one geographical area.

However, a strength of this study was the thorough data analysis techniques used. Rigour was achieved through transparency when detailing the steps they took to analyse the data (Tracy, 2010).

Their findings revealed 5 main reasons that mentoring relationships end. Two of these were based on mentor or youth dissatisfaction due to a lack of connectedness in the relationship. They examined the correlation between reasons for relationship endings, relationship strength and types of relationship endings. 'Strong' relationships were described as a mutual connection and investment in the relationship felt by mentor and mentee. Spencer et al. (2017) explained that premature relationship endings can have a negative effect on youth. Moreover, 'strong' relationships tended to end in a planned and thoughtful way, causing minimal distress to the young person.

These findings are similar to those found previously by Washington (2015), who discussed how young people developed a strong commitment to the mentoring relationship, through having a personal connection with their mentors. In their study, almost all participants established a connection with their mentor through shared interests.

Mtika and Payne (2014) discussed, in their evaluation of a school-based mentoring

program in Scotland, that personality was an important factor in establishing a connection within the relationship. They highlighted that matches based on career interests were not sufficient and that introductory meetings should be utilised before formally starting the relationship in order to determine personality similarities and differences (Mtika and Payne, 2014).

However, one of the articles reviewed provides an alternative opinion to the view on the importance of match quality and what constitutes match strength. Larsson et al. (2016) found in their study of a female mentoring program, that having the same personality was not an essential factor needed to form a connection. They discussed that mentors who displayed understanding and empathy were valued the most by mentees and therefore contradicts some of the research discussed above.

2. Support from others

Mentoring service coordinators often play a vital but hidden role in the development and sustainment of mentoring relationships.

MacCallum et al. (2017) found that coordinators are crucial in supporting mentors when relationships become fragile. Providing a space and time for mentors to debrief and reflect on situations with someone in a supervisory role allowed coordinators to provide reassurance, constructive feedback and helpful strategies to help salvage the relationship (MacCallum et al., 2017). This suggests that although coordinators are not directly involved in the relationship, regular input with mentors can increase

the likelihood of relationships being able to withstand difficult periods (Higley et al., 2014).

Not only do coordinators impact the mentoring relationship, but it is evident that school and family involvement play a vital role in the quality and sustainment of relationships, also (Mtika and Payne, 2014; Spencer and Basualdo-Delminico, 2014; Lakind et al., 2015). By creating a multidisciplinary approach to the relationship, mentors can collaborate with others involved in the mentees lives and lean on them for support when challenges arise (Higley et al. 2014). This ultimately results in higher quality relationships being established.

For example, Mtika and Payne (2014) explained participants felt that there needed to be greater school involvement in the mentoring of young people. They suggest that schools should take more responsibility in explaining the mentoring process to students, including expectations and benefits. They added that this would perhaps result in better outcomes for the majority of mentoring relationships (Mtika and Payne 2014). This research has a strong evidence base, driven by national legislation for education in Scotland, making it very topical at its time of release. However, there are some issues with this research. Unfortunately, the researchers had no say in the recruitment of participants, with mentees being purposively selected by a steering committee and mentors self-selecting to participate. This could potentially lead to bias. For example, the committee may have only chosen participants they knew had had a positive experience therefore affecting the trustworthiness of the study, as the sample may not be representative of the

population (Oppong, 2013). Furthermore, the decision of mentors to participate may have been driven by a desire to voice their opinion of good or bad experiences, perhaps leading to over-exaggerated findings (Heckman 2010).

There are similarities between the negative outcomes experienced with limited school involvement and also with limited parental involvement. Spencer and Basualdo-Delminico (2014), studied the ways in which mentoring programs involve families and how this influences the mentoring process. They revealed that mentoring relationships tends to be most successful when they involved the young person's family in some way. Adding that lack of family involvement is a major factor that influences relationship longevity (Spencer and Basualdo-Delminico, 2014). This research discusses the different approaches services could take in order to incorporate family involvement into the mentoring process. However, the value of this research needs to be investigated. Participants were purposively sampled to include mentoring agencies that stated a commitment to family involvement. Therefore, the consensus regarding the benefits of family involvement are unsurprising. These findings may not be a true representation of all mentoring programs.

Lakind et al. (2015) provided a perspective on the tough role mentors often play being involved in multiple contexts of their mentee's life. For example, in their study they interviewed professional mentors on their perspectives of their role and the environmental factors that can affect this. They found that mentors often described themselves as serving as

the link between home and school and being the counterbalance to the lack of support young people receive from others in their lives (Lakind et al. 2015). This study is important as it has contributed to the understanding that, if families and schools are not actively involved or interested in the mentoring relationship, their actions or lack of, can impede on the efforts and progress being made between the young person and mentor (Herrera et al. 2013).

3. Relationship closures

In an ideal situation, the decision to end a mentoring relationship should be mutual, resulting in a positive and growth promoting experience for the young person (DuBois 2014). However, this is not always the case and perhaps more consideration needs to be given to the ending of mentoring relationships, in order to preserve the progress that has already been made.

Larsson et al. (2016) used a mixed method approach to investigate mentees experiences of the mentoring program 'Girl Zone' in Sweden. This mentoring program had a strict one-year time frame to allow for high turnover and to maintain quality. The findings revealed that mentees experienced feelings of despondency and abandonment at the closure of the relationship and would have appreciated there not to be a time limit (Larsson et al. 2016). As a result, many mentors and mentees chose to continue their relationship following the one-year mark, without backing from the organisation.

The utilisation of qualitative and quantitative research methods

allowed for expansion of this study. The researchers stated that their use of mixed methods would ensure high external validity (Larsson et al. 2016). This is partly true however, the results revealed that many participants were directed to the program through school staff or health professionals, when seeking referral to a counsellor. This research took place in the capital of Sweden, where the researchers acknowledged that there is currently insufficient access to counsellors. Therefore, conclusions drawn from this study may not be representative of other countries where this is not the case.

The study by Spencer et al. (2017), considered relationship closures and how they affected mentees, mentors and families. They found that parents and youths experienced feelings of frustration, sadness and confusion when relationships ended abruptly. They felt disappointed when endings were not done face-to-face and instead delivered via letter or by program coordinators. This research suggests that this issue needs to be highlighted at the pre-match training stage, to educate mentors on how to successfully terminate relationships (Spencer et al., 2017). A strength of this study was that it drew on evidence not only from mentors and mentees, but also families. This links nicely to the aforementioned theme. The mentoring relationship can become more than a dyadic relationship, with others close to the mentee becoming invested and involved, and consequently also feeling affected by the relationship coming to an end.

The researchers chose to reward the participants for taking part in the research by giving parents 50 dollars upon completion of the interview. This

could be seen as a limitation, as more than half of the families involved in the research had a low household income. There are mixed opinions in academia, regarding paying research participants for involvement in research, as it raises some ethical questions with regard to the participant intentions for taking part (Grant and Sugarman, 2004). Although the research methods did not explain whether participants were aware of the payment they would receive prior to taking part, it can be assumed that this incentive would encourage participation. This is particularly concerning when participants are from financially disadvantaged groups. Participants on low incomes may feel coerced into taking part in the research if payment is involved, which in turn raises concern around informed consent (Head, 2009). Unfortunately, this impacts on the credibility of this research.

Limitations

Due to the time constraints of this project, the chosen literature was limited to those published within the last 5 years and that which focused on mentoring programs that were independent from schools and worked with school-aged children. It is important to note that further expansion of the literature search may have provided greater insight into this topic and a wider perspective on the development of befriending relationships.

Conclusion

This Research Briefing highlights some common issues experienced throughout mentoring relationships, including: the matching process and match quality;

the dynamics of others involved in the relationship; and issues surrounding effective closure of relationships. Throughout the literature, it was discussed that connections within befriending relationships are often established through common interests. In occupational therapy, it is believed that personal preferences and interests are the motivation behind what a person does (Duncan 2011). Therefore, it could be beneficial for befrienders to establish a full understanding of the young person's interests and the meanings behind these, as they directly influence the levels of participation and engagement the young person will display (Anderson and Spencer, 2003). An understanding of this may benefit the overall strength of the relationship.

None of the articles above discussed any formal evaluation used to assess

the progress that had been made and to warrant justifiable closure of the relationship. Therefore, an understanding of how to evaluate progress and improvement in collaboration with the young person (Duncan, 2011), may provide more structure to the closure of relationships. Ensuring there is understanding on both sides for the choices made and eliminating feelings of confusion or abandonment.

From the key issues and themes that arose in the literature, links to occupational therapy practice can be drawn, including key therapy tools and professional skills that may be beneficial to befriending relationships. It is hoped that these links can begin to be explored further and contribute to establishing an evidence base for occupational therapy involvement in befriending services.

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