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Mentoring Pilot Projects In South Australia

by

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and
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Background

The projects, on which this workshop is based, aimed broadly to investigate mentoring as a means of providing careers advice to students at risk. The schools involved were already working on models of mentoring practice prior to funds for this series of pilots becoming available.

It is important to state at the outset that the pilot projects we will be discussing are not the only programs that incorporate models of mentoring across South Australia. The Pilot Projects that we have been working on were funded through South Australia's Vocational Education Strategy 1997 -1999, this program is more commonly known as 'Ready-Set-Go'.

'Ready, Set, Go' is a plan which seeks to ensure that students are more work ready (Ready); better planned for their career pathways (Set); and more work-wise through increased involvement in work placements (Go). 'Ready, Set, Go' is a coherent and integrated program that aims to equip students with a set of skills, understandings and attributes that will enable them to better manage their transition from school-to-work. The program also seeks to increase the retention of post compulsory students through the provision of a wider range of work related programs within the SACE. The government of South Australia provided funding for this program as a means of adding to funds provided to schools by ANTA and the ASTF to support VET in schools.

The Mentoring Pilots fit within the 'Ready' component of the Vocational Education Strategy. It seeks to ensure that all students, especially those at risk of leaving school early, are provided with opportunities that improve their connection with education, enabling them to develop the competencies they need to be involved in work placement. It incorporated mentoring as a strategy that improves the retention and participation of students in educational programs and projects.

The Mentoring Pilots

The mentoring pilot program focused on schemes that supported the provision of personal and professional advice to students and their introduction into work and community networks. It explored whether mentoring schemes are an effective career and work readiness strategy.

The Mentoring Pilot Projects that were developed by schools aimed at keeping students at risk in touch with education. The majority saw it as a way of enhancing career education for these students. The degree to which this occurred depended largely on students' academic levels and their readiness to participate in work-related activities.

The programs that have been piloted were connected through the following principles:

- The programs are part of the public work of the school
- The programs work through connecting students to each other and the wider community
- Adults, other than teachers, work with the students on learning programs that are curriculum-based
- The programs are part of the core business of the school

The programs sought to challenge the traditional concept of mentoring that can foster a somewhat patronising relationship between a mentor and a young person. The pilot programs were constructed from the premise that both the mentor, and the young person being mentored, would gain some valuable (preferably accredited) learning as a result of being involved in this kind of partnership.

Best Practice

Simpson and Norris International conducted an evaluation of the Mentoring Pilot Projects. They found that principles of best practice were dependent on:

- Flexible school structures that embrace different ways of learning;
- Programs tailored to meet students' needs, capabilities and interests. As one person put it, *17-18 year-olds have to want to do it. You have to create what they want;*
- Students being able to negotiate and make choices about their learning;
- The quality of the student/mentor relationships. One teacher summed it up by saying, *It's the quality of the mentor. The kids have a decent man in their world.* Mentors viewed respectfully by the students were generally people who:
 - Were good listeners;
 - Could maintain confidentiality and trust;
 - Had an understanding of where students were at and attempted to build on individual strengths and interests;
 - Were able to model appropriate work-related behaviours;
 - Had the ability to teach the students new skills (mostly vocational skills);

- Could provide support, advice, encouragement and the occasional “kick in the pants” when required;
- Truly delegated responsibility to the students;
- Treated the students as adults and expected them to behave as adults. One mentor summed it up as “the old pal’s act” where the relationship with the kids was not authoritarian. *We swap a few yarns, give them credit for having intelligence. You need to be strict with them. “If you want to be in the workforce, you do it like in the workforce.”*

The key factors contributing to best practice were concerned with:

- quality relationships;
- choice;
- working with the students’ interests and capabilities;
- maintaining expectations of success with the students.

All schools involved in the pilots were highly committed to the program and were going to try and find ways to maintain it in following years. This is probably the best indicator of the value schools attribute to it and ultimately its success.

Strategies and Structures

The strategies adopted by schools in the project, to retain students at risk and enhance their access and participation in career education, included:

- combining mentoring with an alternative program of vocational and academic components matched to the students’ levels of competence;
- flexibility and communication in schooling arrangements to accommodate the mix of vocational and academic programs;
- establishing quality “non-authoritarian” relationships between students, teachers and mentors involved in the project;
- developing authentic means of assessment of alternative programs within mainstream assessment frameworks;
- negotiating choices with students and working with their areas of interest;
- seeking out highly committed mentors prepared to give and receive time, trust and respect with the students involved;
- offering students experience of success;
- developing a process of directing students to pathways that may have evolved from the mentoring program;
- providing support structures for the mentors.

The Pilots

Seven secondary schools were involved in the pilots. Pilot leaders from each of the schools met on several occasions during the life of the pilots to discuss issues of practice and to develop guidelines that would be useful for other schools considering implementing this kind of approach.

Brief summaries of the work undertaken by each of the schools follows. Further information can be accessed from the schools themselves. It is anticipated that a web-site will be constructed by the end of this year as a central point of access for information about all the pilots.

Edward John Eyre High (Whyalla) Nan Reid

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Focus: progression from using school staff to using a community based mentor system

- Mentors worked in a support capacity with students at risk who were working on the Certificate in Preparatory Education (CPE) while they completed stage one of the SACE. The school entered into an agreement with the local TAFE about the delivery of stage one and two of the CPE
- Mentors were drawn from school staff who had been working with these students in the alternative program.
- The mentor's role was to support the young person to get through the SACE/CPE and develop associated attitudes and skills.
- The aim of the pilot was to introduce this scheme to the wider community and invite members of the local community to mentor some of these young people. Initially the school used tradespeople working on site at the school as their first non-school-based mentors.
- The school identified the issue of raising the student's belief in the possibility of a future of successful work and study outcomes as a first step in a career education program.
- The school is keen to establish appropriate protocols and procedures within the school community prior to unleashing the model on the wider community. This will involve setting up networks with the local Centre Link.

Fremont-Elizabeth City High (Adelaide) Rob Andrew

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Focus: community based enterprises as venue for mentoring

- Students have been working in an organic garden (The Patch) that produces food for Anglicare's Way Cafe, and seedlings for sale through the Mission's Nursery.
- The work undertaken at The Patch is accredited in the schools assessment and reporting procedures.
- The work at The Patch has three possible purposes for students at risk. The program can serve as a point of connection for young people who are on the extreme margins of schooling. In this capacity, working in the garden serves to support the young person to get used to the routines associated with work and school. The youth worker who runs the garden supports the development of skills around relationships and resolving conflict. For those young people who discover a particular interest in working in landscape gardening or horticulture the program provides projects that are accredited to Society and Environment studies at years 8-10 and also offers VET accreditation in Horticulture for those students who stay involved in years 11 and 12.
- This pilot seeks to develop this partnership further, allowing for expansion of the project to involve young women from the school and other components of the Mission's work (Op Shop and Child Care Centre).

- Staff members at the Mission, (youth and community workers) provide mentoring to the students involved.

LeFevre High / Taperoo High (Adelaide) Andrew Smith

Contact Taperoo High School (08) 8248 1422

Focus: mentoring as a means for developing community resources

- Both LeFevre and Taperoo have a partnership with the Port Adelaide/Enfield Council that allows them access to, and say in the running of, the LeFevre Recreation Centre.
- So far this partnership has enabled both schools to run a Behaviour Management focus course for students from both schools at the centre, making use of the council's youth worker and the facilities at the centre
- This pilot sought to foster the development of an enterprise at the centre in the field of Recreation.
- Second and third year Environment, Recreation and Management students from The Levels Campus of the University of South Australia were invited to complete requirements for their field placements by mentoring students at risk from the two high schools as they developed and ran a Recreation program with students from the local Primary Schools
- As this project continues to develop it is planned that these students will take on more of a management role within the management structures of the Recreation Centre.

Open Access College (based in Adelaide, Distance Education Provider serving students who live across South Australia) Grant Small

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Focus: mentoring for students who experience various forms of school phobia

- This pilot sought to develop a coordinated approach to the mentoring that takes place through the College. The pilot manager used an action research model to support a group of teachers within the college become mentors for some of their most 'at risk' students (Young Aboriginal boys in detention Centres, students suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Student with Emotional disorders)
- The Student counsellor worked with agencies that support some of the students enrolled through The College to establish mentoring relationships between the students, their OAC Teachers and personnel from these agencies.
- These relationships focused on the student development planning process using the Key Competencies as a framework for organisation and development of these plans
- The relationships aimed to assist students in their transition back to face-to-face learning

Windsor Gardens Vocational College (Adelaide) Mary Mcpherson

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Focus: The IT industry

- The school used TAFE students and young people recently employed in the IT industry as mentors in both face-to-face and on-line situations
- Young women involved began their work by developing the Vocational College Web site

- Students then worked alongside a recently retired IT specialist to develop a package of information (including a video) about their school that was used on a promotional visit to Japan.
- The school plans to use the relationships that they have now established to develop IT projects with their local community

Salisbury High School (Adelaide) Glenys Munro

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Focus: Old Scholars as mentors

- The pilot enabled the school to expand their old scholars network and their Adopt a STAR program
- These programs match students at risk with old scholars and SSO staff within the school to complete tasks around the school and the wider community

Salisbury East High (Adelaide) Anne Walsh

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Focus: development of pathways for students at risk using mentors to increase retention and participation

- This pilot focused on the schools' Community and the Environment and Music Industry pathways which have been developed to provide alternative pathways for students at risk.
- It made use of mentors from within businesses connected to the two pathways to support the development of enterprises at the school
- The student Enterprises allowed them to gain experience of work along with support from people currently working within the industry without having to be involved in a work placement program. This ensured a level of support that these students needed in order to realise success within their courses

Parafield Gardens High (Adelaide) Debbie Scottan & Nigel Howard

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Focus: Mentoring as a strategy to expand the educational provision available to the range of students

- The school sought to continue the development of its mentoring program. In this program Community Service students from the local TAFE were invited to be trained as mentors for students who were not attending school regularly. The training and the work with the students were an accredited part of TAFE's Certificate in Youth Studies.
- The model was then extended to involve teaching students from the University of South Australia as a means of providing them with practical teaching experience working on curriculum-based projects with students at risk.

**Guidelines for School-based Mentoring Programs
developed through the work of the pilots**

As the pilots were developed the project managers worked together to formulate a series of guidelines to address some of the issues that they faced in implementing the concept of mentoring in schools.

Responsibilities of schools:

- Roles, rights, responsibilities of mentors are clearly defined so that the mentor understands where they fit within the school's student support framework
- Mentor tasks clearly defined in an induction program that includes
 - Awareness of mandatory reporting and grievance procedures
 - Awareness of principles of anti-racism and sexual harassment grievance procedures
- Mentor provided with supervision (and additional training depending on the role of the mentor and the degree to which he or she will be working individually with students)
- School nominates a staff member to oversee the mentoring program
- Mentors rights (EO, OHSW) are acted upon
- Budget line for mentoring program is maintained
- Insurance authorities are informed of the mentors presence in a school
- Guidelines reviewed in consultation with mentors
- Records kept of the mentor and their role within the school
- Parent/caregiver consent must be gained for dependent students to be involved in a mentoring program
- Student involvement is accredited using the curriculum frameworks (i.e.: Statements and Profiles or SACE)
- Volunteers involved in mentoring programs should be fit and proper people (referee statements or police checks could be used to support their involvement)
- Students are trained with respect to protective behaviors and grievance procedures

Responsibilities of Program Managers:

- Program managers must apply a mentor screening process which ensures the safety and well-being of students
- The role of mentors needs to be clearly defined in terms of support and intervention
- There must be a clearly articulated induction program
- Training and support should be in place that ensures regular contact with program organisers and regular peer support meetings and training with other mentors that reflects the capacity in which the mentor is working
- While mentor intervention is generally a short term strategy there must be commitment from the program organisers to use the information gathered through mentor intervention to inform school structures and processes to better meet the needs of students
- The terms of a mentor's contact with a young person must be stated explicitly in a contract, their role must be very clear and free of ambiguity, the nature of the relationship needs to be defined
- The emotional impact of the ending of a mentoring relationship needs to be taken into account in the planning process
- A mentor and a young person/young people should be matched carefully
- The time span over which a mentoring relationship takes place is significant, this needs to be negotiated with those involved
- Mentor training should be recognised formally where possible

Responsibilities of mentors:

- Mentors should be aware of DETE policy and guidelines relating to student management and duty of care
- Realistic time commitment made towards mentoring programs
- Mentors need to be in a position to make a reliable and regular commitment (regarding time expectations etc.)
- Effective mentoring takes place from a position of empathy, understanding and respect
- Mentors need to ensure that they keep their mentoring relationship within the boundaries of the contract that they are working under, and that any concerns are raised through appropriate channels
- Mentors are aware of their responsibilities to act according to instructions from appropriate people
- Confidentiality preserved in dealing with sensitive issues in line with school expectations and the legal responsibilities inherent in mandatory reporting
- Observe OHSW practices and regulations as well as mandatory reporting requirements

Students:

- Students need to commit to a formal / informal agreement with a mentor
- Students are familiar with grievance procedures and protective behaviors

Key points from Commissioner of Public Employment (SA):

- mentoring service to be without payment, other than out of pocket expenses, a budget line can be established to support this
- involvement of volunteers in mentoring program will not displace paid staff

Evaluation

The success of the pilots was largely dependent on a number of factors:

- the establishment of quality, non-authoritarian relationships mentors, students and teachers;
- providing students with support programs pitched at their level to improve academic standards;
- motivating and guiding students towards pathways for further education or employment.

It was difficult to determine which of these factors had the most impact on students' retention and enhanced career education, largely because the mentoring programs were most often woven in with an alternative program offering a blend of vocational and academic education. Even so, all evidence suggests that students are staying at school as a result of mentoring/alternative education programs and that most view these programs as a pathway to work.

Where students have moved on to employment, traineeships or pursuit of a particular career pathway, there seems to be a direct link with their experience in the mentoring project. These students have engaged in programs where they have developed vocational skills or an interest in a particular career due to the direct influence and experiences the mentors have provided. This would suggest that mentors who can provide direct experience of, or access to vocational information, have been most effective in supporting the objective of enhanced career education for students at risk.

The researchers recommended that the mentoring strategy be maintained with students at risk and that it has the potential to be transferred to new educational contexts where the objective is to enhance students' career education. Contexts that they suggested were:

- using mentoring as a career education strategy with mainstream students;
- applying mentoring within the context of enterprise education where mentors can “model” enterprising behaviors and attitudes with selected students and challenge principals, teachers and students to be more enterprising;
- using mentors with special expertise to support particular VET pathways within the school.

The researchers did not recommend whole scale implementation of the mentoring strategies investigated by the pilot schools. They suggested that schools proceed with caution, implementing a feasibility study prior to gaining support funding or approval to carry out the program. Schools that apply mentoring in any context need to carefully investigate and gather data relating to the sorts of questions below. The reason behind undertaking such a study prior to commencing a program such as this is to maximize the chance of the goals or outcomes being achieved. Too many well-intentioned programs start because they seem like a good idea rather than because they can meet a specific goal, are feasible, and can be sustained. Questions underpinning a feasibility study include:

- What would the intended outcomes from the mentoring program be?
- Which student cohort would the program want to focus on and why?
- What would the indicators of achievement of those goals be?
- What factors within the local context are necessary to sustain a mentoring program for that cohort or those cohorts?
- Are all those factors present in the context? If not, can they be created?
- Is the school structure sufficiently flexible and the ethos sufficiently positive to accommodate such a program?
- If not, are changes necessary, feasible and likely?
- What local community people could offer mentoring support?
- What is their level of willingness and availability?
- What resources would be necessary to operate the program?

The purpose for considering these questions is so that educational communities make informed decisions about the use of mentoring rather than trying to simply say “It worked with students at risk. Let’s try it here.”

Conclusions

The major conclusions of the research in the pilot schools are that

- mentoring is an effective strategy to enhance career education for students at risk;
- mentoring has impacted positively on retention rates of these students when used in combination with alternative programs for students at risk;
- there are specific qualities of an effective mentor for students at risk;
- schools involved in the pilot have successfully developed and trailed a range of strategies and structures to support a mentoring program in a school context and these may be useful to other schools intending to develop mentoring programs.
- schools wishing to implement a mentoring program should undertake a feasibility study first to ensure optimum conditions for its success:

Colleen Abbott is a curriculum officer with the South Australian Education Department. Her main focus has been with students at risk -- as a project officer, school-based co-ordinator and counsellor. Currently, Colleen's work is concerned with issues related to students at risk in vocational education and training

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Nigel Howard has been teaching in the northern suburbs of Adelaide for 16 years. His major focus has been linking students' learning with the community. At Parafield Garden High School he has worked to develop the school as a focus school for youth and community development.

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Debbie Scottan comes to the teaching profession with a background in community development. Nigel and Debbie have been working together on community-based learning projects for eight years. She has a continuing commitment in community development of education.

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