'He told me to calm down and all that': a qualitative study of forms of social support in youth mentoring relationships

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide growth in formal youth mentoring programmes over the past two decades is partly a response to the perception that young people facing adversity do not have access to supportive relationships with adults and positive role models in their communities to the degree they once had. Formal mentoring programmes facilitate the development of a friendship or 'match' between an older volunteer and a young person, with the objective of supporting the young persons' personal and social development. Drawing on 66 semi-structured interviews with young people, parents, mentors and case-workers associated with nine youth mentoring matches in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programme in Ireland, this paper analyses the forms of social support evident in the mentor–mentee relationships and highlights how the mentoring relationship was perceived to have impacted on the well-being of the young people participating. The findings reflect the consensus in the mentoring literature that close, well-established mentoring relationships have the potential to bring about meaningful change in the lives of young people.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that natural mentors such as an aunt, uncle or sports coach are often present in the lives of resilient young people, particularly at times of change and transition (Werner & Smith 1982; Rutter 1985). There is concern, however, that due to the changing nature of modern society, young people do not have access to supportive relationships with adults and positive role models in their communities to the degree they once had (Rhodes 2002). Formal youth mentoring programmes aim to nurture such relationships in the context of formal programmes (Dolan & Brady 2011) by creating a 'match' or rela-tionship between a young person and a voluntary mentor, which is overseen by a caseworker. The mentor is expected to meet with the young person for 1–2 hours per week for a minimum of 1 year, during which time it is hoped that a friendship will develop that will support the young person's development.

The research literature has contributed important insights into the processes through which youth mentoring works, its limitations and the contexts in which it can be most successful. Quantitative studies have shown evidence of outcomes in a variety of areas such as emotional well-being, education and risk behaviour and relationships with parents and peers (Tierney *et al.* 1995; Blinn-Pike 2007; DuBois *et al.* 2011). Qualitative studies have explored the processes underpinning mentoring relationships. For example, studies by Renee Spencer illustrated how relational processes of authenticity, empathy, collaboration and companionship are evident in mentoring relationships (Spencer 2006), the reasons for relationship ending (Spencer *et al.* 2014) and the involvement of families in mentoring programmes (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico 2014). Jean Rhodes (2005) made a signifi-cant contribution to the literature by outlining a theory of mentoring influence. According to Rhodes, a 'strong inter-personal connection, characterized by mutuality, trust and empathy' (2005, p. 31) is a foundation from

which the relationship can influence the social, emotional, identity and cognitive development of the young person.

One of the primary purposes of mentoring programmes is to create meaningful changes in the social support that young people receive (Barrera & Bonds 2005). There is a large body of research illustrating the benefits of perceived availability of social support during adolescence (Bal *et al*. 2003), with better mental and physical health outcomes associated with supportive relationships. Studies have shown that having at least one caring adult in a young person's life can help in dealing with stress and improve mental well-being (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012). However, there is little focus in the mentoring literature on qualitative analyses of the nature of support provided in youth mentoring relationships. Drawing on an in-depth study of nine successful mentoring pairs in the Irish Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) programme, this paper illustrates the types of support identified in the mentoring relationships studied and highlights perceived improvements in the young person's welfare, particularly in terms of their emotional and behavioural well-being, that may have occurred as a result of this support.

METHODOLOGY

The setting for the research was the Irish BBBS programme, which is operated by Foróige, a national youth organization. The research took place in the context of a broader study, which was underpinned by an embedded mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007), whereby a qualitative strand was 'embedded' in the context of a quantitative study (see Dolan *et al*. 2011 for further information). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research ethics committee of the author's institution. At the time of recruitment to the qualitative strand, approximately 50 young people had been matched with mentors as part of the longitudinal quantitative strand of the study. BBBS project staff asked these participants (young people and parents) if they would also be willing to participate in a series of interviews with the research team. A total of 21 young people (and their parents) agreed to participate. From this group, a purposive sample of 10 was selected, representing a balance across characteristics of age, gender, location, family situation and reason for referral. All participants (young person, parent, mentor and caseworker) provided full written consent and had the study explained to them verbally and in a written summary.

Code numbers rather than names were assigned as identifiers for transcripts. Minor details were changed in quotes to protect the identities of participants.

In order to attain evidence from all key stakeholders in the mentoring relationship, semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth, parents, mentors and caseworkers (staff) on two occasions: at the early stages of the relationship and approximately 6 months later. The first round of interviews was undertaken between November 2008 and March 2009, when 35 of out a total of 40 possible interviews were completed. One young person decided not to participate, resulting in a sample of nine matches. The second round of interviews was conducted between May and October 2009. On this occasion, 31 out of a total of 36 possible interviews were completed. Interviews not completed were as a result of illness, inability to contact the person or because the person had moved away. The average match had been ongoing for 5.2 months at the time of the first interviews. By the second round of interviews, for the seven matches still participating in the study, the average match length was 12.7 months. In the interviews, respondents were asked about their experiences of the programme and how the mentoring relationship was working out.

Interview notes and transcripts were read through several times to enable the researcher to get a sense of the development of each match and to reflect on whether and how the outcomes were evident in each case. In the first phase of analysis, the data were coded according to the themes arising, using Nvivo (QSR International (UK) Limited Cheshire, United Kingdom) software. These initial themes were then grouped into higher order categories. When all interviews had been coded, the transcripts and interview notes were re-read in full to ensure that nothing had been missed and some revisions were made. Having four perspectives (mentee, mentor, parent and caseworker) on each mentoring relationship was very useful as it enabled triangulation to occur, whereby viewpoints regarding outcomes or processes could be compared.

Five male and four female young people took part in the study, with an average age of 12 years at the time of referral. Only three of the youth lived with both parents at the time of the study intake. All the young people were Irish, one participant belonged to the travelling community and all lived in rural areas or towns in the West of Ireland. The young people were dealing with a range of family and personal issues, including break-up of their parents' relationship, bereavement, incarceration of family members,

behavioural problems and literacy problems. The average age of the mentor was 33 years on recruitment to the programme, while most mentors were single with some third-level education. As mentoring relationships are same sex, the gender breakdown for mentors was the same as for mentees.

PROCESSES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

In the data analysis phase of the study, it became apparent that, although there were qualitative differences in the dynamics and focus of each 'match', particular supportive processes could be distinguished across the nine mentoring relationships studied. The social support literature (e.g. Cutrona & Russell 1990; Wills 1991) identifies particular types or functions of social support in interpersonal relationships: concrete (also referred to as tangible or practical), companionship, emotional, esteem and advice. These functions were felt to be valuable in terms of illustrating the ways in which mentors supported young people in the mentoring relationships studied. The evidence from the study in relation to each form of support is now discussed.

Concrete and companionship support

Concrete support is described as the provision of practical acts of assistance (Cutrona 2000; Dolan & Brady 2011), whereas companionship support is defined as giving people a sense of social belonging (Wills 1991). In the case of mentoring relationships, it can be argued that both of these types of support are intertwined. A number of parents in the study referred to the fact that their child 'did not get out much', mostly because they as parents did not have time, money or resources to facilitate this to happen and, in some cases, because the young person was shy and unwilling to engage in social events with peers. One of the most obvious forms of support offered by mentors was concrete support in terms of enabling the young person to get out of the house and do something different for a few hours every week. The weekly activities undertaken were based on companionship, including one-to-one activities (such as going to cafes, cinema, cooking), but also frequently involved group events such as sports or youth clubs.

Spencer (2006) draws our attention to relational theories that explain how companionship can lead to increased happiness. Much has been written about the importance of social participation or integration in supportive relationships (Weiss 1973; Barrera &

Ainlay 1983) whereby people benefit from meeting others, companionship and sharing leisure activities. Engaging in shared leisure activities with someone you like and who you know likes you enhances the pleasure of everyday life and contributes to better emotional well-being (Rook & Underwood 2000; Spencer 2006). For example, Amy's mother was of the view that the individual attention provided by the mentor, allied to the fact that the mentor supported her to get out and meet people in different situations, had given her daughter more confidence.

> I have six kids, so it's hard to get time alone with each one, so I think she enjoys time for herself, to do whatever she wants without having to compete with anybody else, so she seems to have grown in confidence. (Parent)

During their time together, mentors often introduced young people to broader social networks and made connections for them with people who had the capacity to offer them opportunities. This support can be conceptualized as a form of bridging social capital (Putnam 2000; Hamilton & Hamilton 2004), wherein young people are helped to make use of social and community resources and to take advantage of opportunities emanating from the mentor's own social networks and connections (Dubas & Snider 1993). For example, one young person, Brendan, had played football in the past and, according to his mentor, Alan, had been quite good at it but had 'drifted away' from the sport as a result of family problems. Alan described how he re-introduced Brendan to the football club and expressed the view that his contacts in the club would be 'good to him', reflecting Keller's (2007) perspective that the mentor may mediate the acquisition of social capital by fostering relationships to others in the community who become advocates for the young person. Keller suggests that this exposure to a larger community of adults may positively influence the young person's transition to adulthood.

> He's back playing sport and I'm very involved in sport here. Which means I know everybody that's in charge of things and they will be good to him too, so and he's actually playing good sport. (Alan, mentor)

Concrete and companionship support can be provided by mentors to mentees without necessarily having a close bond. Supportive acts of this nature, however, can help to create a context and structure from which a friendship and discovery of shared interests can emerge, and from which emotional, esteem and advice support can more readily be offered and accepted.

Emotional support

One of the pioneers of social support theory, Cobb (1976) described emotional support as information that leads a person to believe they are cared for. Emotional support took many forms in the mentoring relationships studied, including the mentor listening to and empathizing with the young person and acting as a 'sounding board' for daily events and challenges. All of the mentors referred to the conversations they had with their 'little' as an important part of the relationship, and were happy to take the lead from the young person regarding what she or he wished to talk about, as the following quote illustrates.

> I suppose we go for chats, helps him maybe relieve thoughts that he'd had on his mind or in his head and he gets them out there and we discuss them. (Ronan, mentor)

Empathy is an important attribute in emotional support, defined by Spencer (2006) as understanding another person's frame of reference and emotional experience. There were many examples of the mentor's empathizing with the young person.

> I suppose for me coming from a big family too, there is a need to spend a bit of time with someone on your own. I would have been aware of it when I was younger too and I suppose because of my background and my upbringing and problems in my childhood, it would have been a lovely thing for me to have somebody that you could just spend a bit of one to one time with, away from your home and away from your school and away from all the other influences in your life. (Carmel, mentor)

There was variation in the degree to which young people in this study opened up to their mentors about personal issues. Some young people were open from the start, while others became more comfortable with divulging personal difficulties as the relationship became closer. Some young people did not confide in their mentors about personal issues at any stage of the relationship but appeared to derive support and encouragement with normative pressures such as school and exams. The following quotes from mentors highlight their different experiences in this regard.

> She seemed to find it easy to talk and spoke about things that were quite personal and that I felt that she wouldn't have spoken maybe to anybody else. It was kind of fairly intimate stuff you know. (Niamh, mentor)
> Amy (young person) has never come to me with a problem or mentioned really any difficulties in her life, so we're more of a friendship where we'd be catching up on different things that are happening in her life. (Ciara, mentor)

Some mentors supported their mentee in dealing with emotions and behavioural issues that enabled them to interact more effectively with others and to deal with negative situations such as bullying. Rhodes quotes Gottman (2001) who referred to this as 'emotion coaching', whereby adults model and teach strategies for managing emotions and feelings. For example, Fiona's mother described how her daughter's mentor helped her to deal with bullying through a combination of emotional and advice support. It illustrates how the mentor, Noreen, was attempting to build the young person's capacity to cope with such issues in the future, reflecting Rhodes (2005) view that mentors can help young people to build their personal resources and deal more effectively with negative experiences.

> She (Fiona, young person) was going through a rough patch at the time and I was just pulling my hair out with her you know. She was being bullied in school and no matter what I did it was making it worse in her eyes. So this Big Sister (Noreen) was a great help. . . . She actually sat her and spoke to her and said 'well look, you don't need to put up with this bullying'. Fiona herself actually told me that Noreen explained this to her and she's at the end of the phone and she meets her and all that but she is going to have to try and stick up for herself as well. Gave her a little bit of confidence. (Parent)

Because, as Cutrona (2000) points out, people deal with stress in different ways, support that does not match the individual's style of coping will not be effective. For some young people, particularly girls, talking about the stress in their lives was their preferred way of coping whereas others, particularly boys, appeared to derive emotional support from their mentor to deal with difficult personal issues without openly discussing the issue with him or her. A case in point is Brendan, who did not mention his parents break-up with his mentor, Alan, until a few months after it had happened but Brendan's mother believes that he took emotional comfort from the consistency of the presence of Alan in his life, as this quote suggests.

> Myself and his father broke up in the last year, so there has been an awful lot of changes for Brendan. But I just think that Alan gives him that stability whereas I didn't, and his father didn't, you know? He still has a continuum with Alan; Alan was still here on the dot every week, once a week, sometimes twice a week. So it's certainly helped . . . He's had consistency as far as Brendan goes. (Parent)

Similarly, this caseworker expressed the view that another young person, Mark, saw his 'match' as a space in which he could escape from the stresses in his life.

> I think it was an outlet for Mark. . . . mum said to me when he comes up to the estate, he's being bullied at school and also

the estate, very little friends and it was something, by meeting Ronan (mentor), it was something that he took ownership of himself and that he didn't share with anybody else . . . (Caseworker, match 7)

This illustrates how mentoring relationships can be used as a resource to help young people to cope in whatever way they feel comfortable. Where it works well, it can be considered an example of 'optimal matching', whereby the support offered matches the need of the intended recipient (Cutrona 2000). However, the closer and better established the relationship, the more comfortable the young person is likely to be in availing of the 'optimal' support required for their needs.

Esteem support

Cutrona (2000) refers to esteem support as one person expressing love and concern for the other. Esteem support can contribute to the process of identity development which is one of the core processes at the heart of Rhodes' model of mentoring (2005). Young people in this study seemed to derive esteem support from the fact that their mentor was willing to give up their time voluntarily to spend time with them. There were also examples of encouragement and praise from the mentor to the young person. Much has been written about the importance of reciprocity as a quality of supportive relationships. Relationships in which there is mutual assistance rather than one-way giving (Cutrona 2000, p. 115) are likely to be stronger as there is greater equality. A number of the mentoring relationships in this study appeared to be characterized by reciprocity, whereby the mentor perceived that he or she was gaining from the relationship and not just offering support. This reciprocity has the capacity to build the self-esteem of a young person as they are likely to feel that they can make a worthwhile contribution to the relationship. For example, Fiona's mother described how her daughter helped her mentor, Noreen, to overcome a fear of swimming. Similarly, James, a mentor, described how his mentee, Eoin, showed him how to play handball, which they both enjoyed. It is possible that these experiences, as well as being enjoyable, helped the young person to develop their identities as being someone with something valuable to contribute to others.

Advice support

The final type of support identified in Cutrona & Russell's (1990) typology is advice support, referring to the provision of information or guidance. In mentoring relationships, advice and guidance is likely to be more readily accepted if it is provided in a way that does not make the recipient feel admonished. The feedback from research participants is that the ability to offer advice was something that came more easily when the relationship was better established, and where advice could be given in the course of a normal conversation. For example, one mentor, Liam, described how his mentee, Dylan, asked his advice regarding school and education.

> With regard to school I suppose he has not been asking me advice but we have kind of ended up talking about school and what he was going to do so yes, I suppose he would have asked me advice on that or I'd have given my advice, I'm not sure which. (Liam, mentor)

Changes observed in the young people arising from these supportive processes

The concept of emotional and behavioural well-being refers to aspects of psychological and behavioural functioning, such as feelings about self, interpersonal relationships and mental health (Blinn-Pike 2007). The findings of this research suggest that young people had an enhanced sense of emotional well-being as result of the support received from their mentors. The terms 'happier', 'confident' and 'calmer' were consistently used by parents and young people to describe how the young person had changed since being matched with his or her mentor, as illustrated by the following quote:

> *I: What do you like about having a Big Sister?*
>
> P: I don't really know, it's like if you have more time or something.
>
> *I: Ok.*
>
> P: It's like she makes you happy, I don't know.
> (Amy, young person)

Parents and young people in particular referred to the fact that the match appeared to have a calming influence on the young person, especially in cases where the young person, usually a male, would have been described as having a tendency to be 'hyper'.

> *I: Do you think other people should have Big Brothers?*
>
> P: They'd be a lot quieter if they do, they'd calm down like, they'd be more fun. Say, like, you'd meet up then with your Big Brothers and it would be a lot better, so a few more people should have them.
> (Eoin, young person)

In the case of Dylan, the caseworker spoke of how the programme staff hoped that the attention from his big brother would make him have less need to act out to get attention. The testimonies of Dylan himself, his parent and his mentor, Liam, suggested that the strategy was working, as the following quote illustrates.

> Dylan can be a bit hyper at times, and you can tell after he went out with Liam (mentor), you can tell he enjoyed it because he would come back and he would be chilled out and relaxed. (Parent)

Likewise, Joe was described as being 'hyper' and is believed to have calmed down as a result of the influence of his mentor, Sean. His mother felt that he is somewhat calmer and has a better understanding of how to interact with adults. She also spoke of the fact that her son wanted his own way and 'stomped' if he did not get it. Through his match he has learned of the need to share and this behaviour is now improving. Similarly, a caseworker described how, in another case, the mentor challenged the young person in relation to his difficult behaviour in groups, which she believes has made a difference. It reflects Rhodes (2005) view that positive relationships with mentors can generalize, enabling young people to interact with others more effectively.

A number of parents spoke of the increased confidence they witnessed in their child as a consequence of taking part in BBBS and as the programme overall being a source of support to them. For example, Dylan's mother spoke of the fact that her son had suffered a serious illness that somewhat inhibited his social development. She believes that taking part in the programme had knock-on effects in other areas of his life. He now goes out more, has a girlfriend and takes more interest in his appearance.

In terms of effects on school performance, the qualitative evidence in relation to some young people highlights a perception that the young person's greater sense of well-being as a result of their match appeared to be making them more settled at school. For example, Joe's parent said that she was not called in to the school to deal with behavioural incidents as much and felt that it was because her son had 'calmed down' since becoming involved with BBBS. Likewise, Mark's mother described how her son was more settled at school since taking part in the BBBS programme.

> He (Mark) kind of, he kind of quietened down a lot and he's fidgety, kind of, do you know, like, he settled down well. He did, he came on a lot, like and learned a lot. . . . Very good at school now, no complaints or anything so far so thank god for

that. . . . Yeah, it changed, like, very good, now I've had no complaints this year at all from the school, like, so that's good. (Parent)

> Yeah . . . Last year I was really wild . . . He (mentor) told me to calm down and all that. So it's not too bad now. (Mark, young person)

There was one example of where the programme appeared to have a transformative effect on a young person, which in turn led to a change in his attitude and performance at school. Dylan and his mentor, Liam, were matched for 16 months at the time of the last interview and the bond between them was very strong. Dylan was referred to the programme due to conflict with his mother and difficult behaviour at school. His mentor, Liam, described how he and Dylan became close enough to talk about school without compromising the fun aspects of their friendship. The pair spent a considerable amount of time in leisure activities which enabled the young person to develop and hone his aptitude for music and media work. From these discussions and shared experiences, Dylan gained clarity on the direction he wanted his career to go. As a result, even though he still did not like school, Dylan became very motivated to pursue the career path he had identified and his behaviour at school greatly improved.

> How do I like school? . . . I don't like it at all, but yes, this year now is going grand. The year after next now I'm going to try to get into college for sound engineering, so . . . keep my head down, keep busy. . . . definitely without a doubt. If it's not that I'll be in media studies. So, I've a backup plan for each one of them. (Dylan, young person)

Although positive messages from the mentor in relation to school were important, the real change in this case appears to have been driven by the shared enjoyment of pastimes that the young person was passionate about. Rogoff (1990) argues that relational experiences in which the young person and the more skilled partner focus their attention on a task of interest to the youth can be a potent spur to emotional development (Spencer 2006). Likewise, it reflects Deutsch & Spencer's (2009) argument that the development of a strong affective bond makes it easier and more effective for mentors to help mentees address instrumental goals.

CHALLENGES FACED IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

A number of challenges were highlighted by mentors in the course of the research, including finding

suitable activities to engage in rural areas, communication issues between mentors and mentees (e.g. not responding to texts) and finding varied activities to do every week. The respondents described how programme staff supported them to overcome these challenges – e.g. by facilitating a process of contacting each other, providing ideas for activities and making youth facilities available for matches to use. The role of programme staff in supporting matches to address problems and thus ensure longevity has been acknowledged in mentoring research (DuBois *et al.* 2011).

A challenge that is more difficult to overcome relates to the nature of match ending (Spencer *et al.* 2014). Mentors are asked to commit for a minimum of one year, at which point they can review their position and decide if they wish to continue. By the time of the final interviews, three of the nine matches in this study had ended. One had ended before a year had passed, one ended after 15 months and one ended after 16 months. All three were ended by the volunteer, due to changes in personal circumstances in two cases and the mentor realizing that he was too busy in one case. With regard to the latter case, the mentor in match seven withdrew 9 months into the match due to having too many commitments. The young person in this match was very much enjoying the relationship and appeared to be finding it a support in the context of pressure in his life. There is a possibility that he could have felt let down by the early ending of the match. In the other two cases, the ending is likely to be eased by the fact that the reason for closure was beyond the control of the mentor and/or the match had lasted for in excess of 1 year. It illustrates that, because relationships are at the heart of the programme, there is a risk that they will not work out or will end early. This is one of the main risks of the programme, particularly where young people who are vulnerable or have been damaged by relationships may potentially be hurt by the ending of another relationship. However, evidence from the interviews suggests that the programme handles the ending as sensitively as possible to minimize any disappointment for the young person.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social support is acknowledged as a core element in well-being and coping for young people (Bal *et al.* 2003). Youth mentoring programmes aim to formally enhance the social support available to young people, with a particular focus on young people experiencing adversity in their lives. Although there have been many valuable qualitative analyses of youth mentoring relationship dynamics (Philip *et al.* 2004; Spencer 2006), this study is unique in focusing specifically on the types of social support present in youth mentoring relationships. It is our view that youth mentoring relationships created through formal programmes should have, as much as possible, the characteristics of healthy natural relationships occurring outside of programme contexts. For this reason, this study has examined the degree to which the types of social support found in supportive relationships (practical, companionship, emotional, advice, esteem support) are evident in relationships created through youth mentoring programmes. We are also interested in perceptions of how the support provided enhanced well-being and coping for the young people involved.

The findings have highlighted how concrete and companionship support, such as bringing the young person out and introducing them to new activities and people, was evident across the nine relationships studied and was a type of support that could be offered without necessarily having a close bond. This concrete and companionship support appeared to lead to enhanced feelings of well-being among the young people (who described themselves as 'happy' and 'having more time') and acted to create a foundation from which the relationship could develop and lead to the emergence of emotional, esteem and advice support between mentor and mentee. Reflecting Rhodes (2005) model of youth mentoring, these activities are critical for relationship development and can lead to the emergence of a close bond, from which the processes leading to more substantive outcomes for young people can emerge.

The research literature in relation to youth mentoring emphasizes the importance of the quality of the relationship between mentors and mentees – without a close and trusting relationship, the impact of the intervention is less profound (Rhodes 2005; Spencer 2006; DuBois *et al.* 2011). Reflecting this finding, our analysis suggests that emotional, advice and esteem support are more likely to emerge as the relationship becomes close and more akin to a 'naturally occurring relationship' than a 'formal intervention'. Emotional, advice and esteem support were not evident in all relationships studied. In general, the closer the relationship, the more likely these processes were to be observed. The findings illustrate that young people drew on emotional support from the relationship in different ways – with some appearing to use the mentoring relationship as a source of support in their daily lives, while others dealing with more difficult

situations were helped to develop emotional competence and manage negative emotions. Similarly, esteem support was more evident in cases where the relationships were characterized by reciprocity and mentor's genuine pride in the achievements of the mentee could be seen. With regard to advice support, giving advice is a difficult task for mentors as it may be perceived by the young person as 'meddling'. The findings of this study suggest that where the relationship was close and well-established, advice could be given as part of a natural conversation and in a way that would make it accepted by the young person. There were indications of improvements in emotional and behavioural well-being, with reports of young people being happier, calmer and more confident as a result of their mentoring relationship, while in some cases this impacted positively on the young person's behaviour and motivation.

The findings of this study, therefore, support the consensus in mentoring research that close, authentic relationships lasting for 6 months or more and supported by pro-active programme processes have the potential to bring about meaningful changes in young people's lives (Rhodes 2005; Spencer 2006; DuBois *et al.* 2011). Although this study has focused primarily on the positive dimensions of social support, it is important to highlight that mentoring relationships can be challenging for both mentors and mentees. Relationships can end early and potentially cause disappointment and upset to the young person, as appeared to be the case for one young person taking part in this study.

It could be argued that youth mentoring programmes can allow time and space for young people to access tangible help and emotional sustenance that in turn can help them to pursue their own interests, needs and objectives. This research indicates that many young people use the match as a 'space' in which to express themselves and allow their own interests and aptitudes to emerge, providing further evidence that mentoring relationships should be non-directive, emphasizing the development of a supportive relationship rather than prioritizing the achievement of specific goals. For example, Colley (2003) found that a focus on hard outcomes in mentoring schemes undermined the gains that were made in the areas of confidence, outlook and aspirations and argues that mentors are capable of achieving private goals and, if left alone to do this, these gains will aggregate into public goals.

Moss & Petrie (2002) argue that many professional services for children and young people are governed by predetermined objectives regarding what they need, while Parton (2006) believes that large caseloads and a concern with the management of risk in children's services means that there is little time for listening and participation. As a counter to the adult-centred vision of what children need, Parton (2006) and Moss & Petrie (2002, p. 106) recommend the concept of 'children's spaces' where children's own agendas can be key, where children are seen as agents of their own lives and where they can be seen as co-constructors, with adults, of knowledge, identity and culture. These findings are of interest from a policy perspective because they illustrate that mentoring programmes of this nature are capable of creating a space for vulnerable children and young people where their own needs can be prioritized and that doing so has the potential to improve the quality of their lives.

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