

Mentoring as a context for developing motivation

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With the proliferation of formal mentoring programs in schools it is important to understand the nature of mentoring and the outcomes that can be expected. This paper examines the findings of a national pilot project of mentoring programs for indigenous students, and interprets them in terms of motivation and the socio-cultural contexts which supported the mentoring relationship. The pilot projects were implemented in 53 school sites around Australia. The evaluation used multiple methods, including document analysis, checklists and semi-structured interviews with participants. The findings showed that students who were supported by a mentor (usually one-to-one) for as little as one hour per week displayed and reported increased self-confidence, enhanced valuing of school and increased participation in classroom tasks. Students also improved relationships with peers, teachers and family members. The paper discusses the socially supported nature of the mentoring relationship and its role in community building.

Background to the project

This paper is based on findings from a national evaluation of the Indigenous Mentoring Pilots Project commissioned by DEST (MacCallum, Beltman, Palmer, Ross & Tero, 2005).¹ The intended aim of these pilot projects was to trial mentoring approaches to improve literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention of participating high school students. The projects also aimed to raise students' expectations of success and the expectations of their parents and teachers. Participating students would have access to additional support via their mentor, and be exposed to a range of pathways in relation to jobs, community work and further education (DETYA, 2001).

An Evaluation Kit (MacCallum, Beltman, Palmer & Collard, 2002) was prepared to assist the collection of data at each local site and for the national evaluation.

Altogether mentoring programs were implemented at 53 school sites. All States and Territories (except Tasmania and Victoria) were represented with pilots located in metropolitan, regional and rural areas. Programs ranged from holiday activities in a rural area to an urban detention centre. In most cases individual sites were grouped together with one "Service Provider" and there were ten such groups. Several other sites were delayed in implementation and are not included in this paper.

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Mentoring has been used as strategy to enhance the academic, social personal and career outcomes for a range of young people (MacCallum & Beltman, 2003). Judging the impact of mentoring programs, however, is still problematic given the difficulty of measuring the kinds of outcomes usually attributed to mentoring. These include self-esteem, problem solving, decision-making and general life skills, and there is a growing body of research literature providing some evidence of improvements in these (for example Bein, 1999; Pascarelli, 1998; Rhodes, 2004; Tester, 1997; Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995). Aspects such as school attendance and retention are much easier to measure and can provide evidence of successful mentoring.

In addition to the literature on the idea of mentoring in western thought, there is also some evidence of 'mentoring like' processes existing within Indigenous cultural systems. Indeed, in a range of ways the conceptualisation of some Indigenous cultural practices can look strikingly similar to classic notions of mentoring. Of recent years there have been a number of mentoring initiatives developed by those involved in working with Indigenous communities (see for example Woods et al, 2000 and Michaels, 1989). It is not surprising, then, that a mentoring strategy should be chosen to be piloted with Indigenous students, with a view to developing the students' abilities in relevant areas, their expectations of success and exposure to a range of future pathways, and ultimately improving specific school-related outcomes.

The aims of this paper are to:

- consider the outcomes of the mentoring in terms of the developing and supporting motivation, and to
- examine the socio-cultural contexts that support the mentoring relationship.

Methodology

Overview

Each mentoring program was required to gather data from a range of participants at various points during the program and the Evaluation Kit, *Going Along Together* (MacCallum et al, 2002), provided background information on the aims and process evaluation, as well as a range of data collection tools. These included a variety of questionnaires, interview schedules and other activities designed to gain feedback from students, mentors, families, program staff and school staff. A national evaluation team also gathered data about individual programs and conducted a cross-case analysis to determine overall findings across programs. Each member of that team was allocated to a Service Provider or group of sites to facilitate and maximise communication. Process data were gathered to assist in understanding how programs were operating and outcome data provided information about how successfully each program and the overall project was in terms of meeting its goals.

The analyses of the data provided by each pilot demonstrated the diversity of the programs in terms of their philosophy and rationale, target group of students, and methods and approaches. This showed that in general, Service Providers were able to adapt the *Mentoring Pilots Project Guidelines* (DETYA, 2001) in order to develop programs that served each particular school community. Each program had its own unique set of goals and each achieved these outcomes to some extent.

Characteristics of mentoring programs

Although using the same guidelines, a key aspect of the overall project was the diversity of mentoring programs in terms of their philosophy and rationale, target group of students, methods and approaches, and program time frames. Table 1 gives an overview to illustrate the range and types of projects developed.

Table 1: Number of program sites, mentors, mentees and types of program activities.

State or Territory	Sites	Mentors	Mentees	Examples of Mentoring Activities
Northern Territory	4	45	21	Workplace visits, interaction with positive indigenous role models, use of website.
Australian Capital Territory	6	5*	31*	Camp, artwork, rap and dance, guest speakers, social gatherings, genealogy activities.
South Australia	13	57*	78*	Discussion groups, cooking, movies, developing a "bush tucker" garden, tours, implementing a community sports project.
Queensland	7	102	80	Sport, fishing, motivational speakers, social events, links with employment agencies.
Western Australia	15	0*	124	Camps, social gatherings, tutoring, face-to-face, email and SMS communication.
New South Wales	8	123	139	Workplace visits, awards nights, artwork on school buildings, creating an Australian garden.
Totals	53	332*	483*	

* Numbers of mentors and mentees were not reported by some programs in the ACT, South Australia and Western Australia, so the total number of mentors and mentees involved in is greater than the numbers quoted here. (MacCallum et al, 2005, p.11; pp.78-87)

Data sources

Different projects provided different types of data of varying degrees of detail, and the national evaluation team also gathered data. Table 2 indicates the types of data and the number of Service Providers who provided different types of data.

Table 2: Number of Service Providers providing different types of data

Type of Data	Number of Service Providers (n=10)
Sent to National Evaluation Team	
• Student Work Samples	3
• Interim Evaluation Report	2
• Other Documents e.g. training guidelines	6
• Phase One Report	9
• Final Report	9
Gathered by National Evaluation Team	
• Face-to-face contact with program organisers	7
• Site Visit	4
• Email and telephone contact with program organisers	10

Within each type of data, each program also used different sources of evidence to support claims. These sources are listed in Table 3 with an indication of the number of Service Providers who made this information available to the National Evaluation team. Some Service Providers had submitted no information at the time of the evaluation, whereas others provided several types of documentation with very detailed evidence to support their claims.

Table 3: Sources of evidence used to support claims

Source of Evidence	Number of Service Providers (n=10)
Feedback from students	9
Feedback from mentors	7
Items from the <i>Going Along Together</i> Evaluation Kit	7
School attendance records	6
Feedback from principals	4
Feedback from teachers	4
Feedback from parents	4
Mentoring session records	3
Observations, comments of Project Coordinator	3
Videos of events	3
Literacy achievement data	2
Numeracy achievement data	1
Records of library borrowings	1
School reports	1
Records of employer visits and career projects	1
Feedback from managers, project officers, reference group members	1
Training workshop evaluation sheets	1
Mentor characteristics form	1

Limitations of the data

The original intention of project and the National Evaluation team was for the respective Service Providers to gather data at each site by from a range of participants at various points to provide triangulation of data and enable changes over time to be documented. The Evaluation Kit (MacCallum, et al., 2002) was designed to facilitate this process. However, inexperience in evaluation and difficulties in data collection reduced the quality of data collected at each site. Some Service Providers submitted the requested case studies of students showing evidence of a positive impact and of students with little evidence of impact. These enabled in-depth insights about the mentoring program in context as did site visits to five projects by members of the National Evaluation team.

Analysis of data

Because of the variety between the programs and the variations in the nature of evaluation data available for each, individual programs could not be compared with each other. Initially, one member of the team examined all documents supplied by Service Providers and the written reports of the National Evaluation team about the sites they were involved with. Each member of the team also read all documents pertaining to the sites allocated to them. Common themes and findings were developed at team meetings.

Findings and Discussion

Positive outcomes reported by programs

Reports obtained from the Service Providers combined data relating to the outcomes achieved at individual program sites. A few of the Service Providers enlisted an independent evaluator to write a report whereas other reports were collated by the Service Provider or program coordinator and hence largely presented the views of the people running the programs. Although each program was able to show some evidence (at least for some students) of progress towards their goals, it was difficult for the National Evaluation Team to make judgements of the effectiveness of individual programs on the basis of the data presented to the team. There was sufficient evidence to show that mentoring had a range of positive outcomes, but insufficient data to measure specific outcomes for individuals or for groups of individuals.

Table 4 indicates the number of Service Providers reporting each positive outcome. Although the overall aims of the mentoring pilots were related to increasing the literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention of individual high school students, most programs adopted broader goals related to their particular context and the outcomes reported by programs were not always restricted to the students. Therefore in Table 4 outcomes are grouped separately for the students, the mentors and for the school and community. All ten (10) Service Providers reported outcomes for students, five (5) for mentors and seven (7) reported outcomes relating to the school and community.

Table 4: Program outcomes for students, mentors and school and community

Outcomes for Students	Number of Service Providers (n=10)
• Increased attendance, less absenteeism	6
• Improved self-esteem, confidence, emotional stability	6
• Enjoyment of mentoring relationship, program; desire for it to continue	6
• Connections made between school and work; development of own career path	5
• Development of various skills e.g. organisational, artistic	4
• Development of leadership skills	3
• Increased ability to solve personal and social problems	3
• Increased retention, increased intention to continue	3
• Improved literacy and numeracy skills	2
• Enhanced connections with school and classroom	2
Outcomes for Mentors	
• Number wanting to join, do training and stay in program	3
• Development of strong relationships with students	2
• Enhanced personal development and self-esteem	1
• Learnt about Indigenous culture and youth issues	1
Outcomes for School and Community	
• Enhanced links between school and community e.g. establishing garden, offers of work, feedback from others in community	5
• Increased involvement of Indigenous families in school	2
• Awareness of and access to high profile and local Indigenous role models	2
• Development of mentoring, internet and other resources	2
• Positive support / comments by school staff and parents	2
• Development of supportive relationships between schools in the program	2
• Positive contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families	1

The major impact of the Indigenous Mentoring Pilots Project can be summarised in terms of four main outcomes.

Sustaining student attendance

There was considerable evidence that Indigenous mentoring programs were instrumental in sustaining the attendance of Indigenous students. With few exceptions it was reported that those who participated in mentoring arrangements spent more time at school.

Strengthening participation

Another consistent outcome of mentoring was the strengthening of Indigenous students' participation in school activities. According to those involved, sometimes this was because students felt more confident as a consequence of increased attention, sometimes because they had been encouraged by their mentor, sometimes because participation was being modelled in the mentoring relationship, and other times because mentoring activities were specifically planned to help buttress elements in the curriculum.

Opening access to Indigenous community

Another crucial outcome of the Indigenous mentoring program was the opening up of dialogue between Indigenous family and community members. In many cases the mentoring program was the first formalised encounter between Indigenous families and schools. As a consequence a number of lasting relationships had been built, resulting in an increase in the level of involvement of Indigenous people in schools.

Building connections to the broader community

Due to the necessity of recruiting mentors from outside the school the mentoring program also helped schools build connections with outsiders such as businesses, church groups, service clubs, civic associations, sports clubs and local councils. Often this had a flow on effect, helping the school with forming partnerships, arranging vocational education experiences, recruiting community members to act in other capacities and build the profile of the school in the community.

Program themes supporting positive outcomes

There was consistent evidence across the programs and further detailed through the case studies and site visits to indicate that good mentoring practice with Indigenous students paid attention to eight themes. These detail the socio-cultural conditions that supported the mentoring relationship:

- Dialogue and relationship building;
- Positive mentor qualities;
- Recognition of Indigeneity;
- Involvement of Indigenous families and community;
- Recognition of the range of cultural, social and educational needs of Indigenous students;
- Clarity of vision and part of a broad plan;
- Leadership and commitment of staff; and
- Thinking creatively when confronted with constraints.

Each of these themes is discussed briefly below.

Dialogue and relationship building

Successful programs emphasised dialogue and relationship building between all participants. Opportunities were made available for students to “meet, interact and share educational and social experiences with adults whose lives and insights both complemented and enhanced the educational process” (MacCallum et al, 2005, p. 56).

One participant remarked,

at the heart of the whole exercise is relationship building, without trust, familiarity and a willingness to mutually share there can be no mentoring program. (p. 56)

As another observed, not only is relationship building important in setting up an environment to achieve other educational outcomes but it can be a legitimate achievement in and of itself, “specially when you consider that many of these students have few healthy relationships with those outside of their family situation.” Typically strong relationships were based on principles such as respect, kindness, generosity and the valuing of student’s inherent value. Relationship building was also enhanced during the activities of mentoring programs involved different forms of collaborative projects such as when students and mentors were actively involved in projects such as creating a Bush Tucker garden.

This feature of good mentoring practice is well documented in the literature (see MacCallum & Beltman, 1999) and in educational practice with Indigenous students (see Hughes, 1997; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). For example, Harslett (2001, p. 1) claims that one of the key characteristics of effective teaching practice with Indigenous students is an “ability to develop good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families.” Critical in this regard is allowing considerable time for those involved to build rapport, trust, taking a personal interest both in and out of school and getting to know each other. It is particularly important where mentors come from outside of the school and of the immediate social network of students to recognise that trust and respect is not automatically given (Munns 1998, p. 173).

Positive mentor qualities

It is established that mentors with positive characteristics are an important factor in successful mentoring programs (see for example MacCallum & Beltman, 1999). In the programs involving Indigenous students an important quality of mentors was having a sense of humour. One coordinator said that, “Aboriginal students draw a great deal on humour and jokes. Being able to laugh, and even be laughed at, can often be a real ice breaker and can cement relationships” (MacCallum et al, 2005, p.57). Similarly effective teaching with Indigenous students involves the use of humour (Harslett, 2001; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004).

Successful mentors demonstrated respect for the students they were mentoring. A coordinator commented that “if you had to encapsulate all the qualities then I think the word respect gets close” (MacCallum & Beltman, 2005, p.57). This is consistent

with Harslett (2001, p. 3) who stated that effective teachers of Indigenous students have a strong capacity to be empathetic, flexible and be able to adjust to the needs of Indigenous students.

Recognition of Indigeneity

Many of the mentors and other program staff were non-Indigenous people and in successful programs there was a recognition that language use by the Indigenous students differed from their own. As one coordinator remarked,

I remember when I realised there were subtle language differences between students and myself thinking that there was no way I could bridge the chasm. However, I gave it a go to try and understand some of the student's ways of talking. I think students picked up that I was trying to learn their language styles. I think they saw this and gave me lots of credit and some respect for trying. (MacCallum et al, 2005, p. 57)

Another coordinator suggested that the language difference may actually be used as a starting point for building relationships between mentors and students. This person recounted how, during a training program, mentors had discussed how they might begin relationship building by asking students to teach them about the words they used that were unique to their friends and family. Others commented on the value of cultural awareness training.

Involvement of Indigenous families and community

One of the ways schools maintained this recognition of Indigeneity and the integrity of Indigenous culture was to make sure Indigenous families were involved centrally in the project. Most schools made significant efforts to encourage the involvement of families in the mentoring projects. Many were not as successful as they would have liked. In many cases families had experienced only negative interactions with schools. One Canberra project found that parents were suspicious of contact because previously they had only been contacted when something was wrong. In this case considerable time, patience and consultation were required. For some involvement of families was not feasible because students were away from home (e.g. the detention centres and residential schools).

Clearly those schools who enjoyed a fuller range of outcomes in the mentoring projects were those who had long recognised that Indigenous families are often the most qualified and appropriate people to either mentor Indigenous students or help guide the selection and management of mentors and were able to engage families in this endeavour. A teacher commented,

at the very least it is important that as teachers we respect Aboriginal families enough to make sure we're being helpful and not invasive. (MacCallum et al, 2005, p. 58)

In many instances, local Aboriginal and Islander education workers or education assistants were able to assist in mentoring projects by brokering relationships between Indigenous parents and schools. In other schools it was important for the coordinator of the mentoring project, to spend time going out into the Indigenous community with the expressed purpose of building relationships, encouraging Indigenous families to become involved and inviting community members to visit and participate in school life.

Recognition of the range of cultural, social and educational needs of Indigenous students

Sometimes in projects that were less successful or were not implemented at all, sufficient resources were not available to address a full range of cultural and social issues, or the tensions between cultural processes and professional educational practices (Partington, 1998). More successful programs, as shown by the variety of structures, activities and outcomes illustrated were able to account for diverse cultural backgrounds. Engaging Indigenous students can also be difficult because, in the past, many educational programs have uncritically embraced popular misconceptions or perpetuated stereotypes (Palmer & Collard, 1993).

According to many with whom we spoke, mentoring programs were reliant on the energy, commitment and contributions of students. Talented and energetic students, often with skills that go unnoticed, were seen as a critical ingredient for success. As one coordinator said,

we tend to emphasise the importance of mentors, but we forget that without energetic students then the whole thing would fold. (MacCallum et al, 2005, p. 59)

This concurs with Malin's (1998) remark that good teachers (and by inference good mentors) "contextualise in a way that relates to past and present experiences and knowledge" (p. 244).

Clarity of vision and part of a broad plan

Another important ingredient for success with mentoring Indigenous students is that mentoring, as a strategy, is used by schools clear about their own vision and educational contribution to the future for Indigenous students. In particular mentoring becomes one part of a broader set of strategies aimed at improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. As one coordinator commented,

the schools that have been most successful in my view are the schools that have a clear plan for how they are attacking problems with Aboriginal students education ... they are doing much better than schools that haven't really thought about mentoring as a strategy.

Another pointed out,

mentoring is about connecting students up ... if the school doesn't have other things in place for Indigenous students then what is it going to connect them up to? (p.60)

Leadership and commitment of staff

Many of those consulted during this evaluation attributed much of the success of mentoring programs to the energy, dedication and commitment of those who took on a leadership role. In particular, many suggested that the program coordinator was critical, particularly when they had experience, knowledge of local conditions and interest in Indigenous education.

Thinking creatively when confronted with constraints

Another theme that regularly emerged was the importance of focusing upon how to get things done rather than on feeling constrained by policy, procedures and risk management regimes. Those programs that tended to succeed often had people

involved who were keen to find ways to resolve challenges rather than let them get in the way of the mentoring process.

Mentoring as a context for developing motivation

When reconsidering the outcomes of the mentoring pilots, the outcomes for students of increased participation in school-based activities, self-confidence and valuing of school correspond to different understandings of motivation. Socio-cultural approaches to motivation (e.g. Hickey, 2003; Matusov & Angelillo, 1997) consider participation to be the essence of motivation, and for many of these young Indigenous students the mentoring relationships provided them with a context to participate. Social cognitive approaches to motivation consider concepts based on self confidence and valuing of tasks to be fundamental elements of motivation (e.g. Wigfield, Eccles & Rodriguez, 1998).

The mentoring relationship provided a focal point and the program an opportunity for the development of a network of relationships. These included the mentors, coordinators, family and community members. Many of these people began to think and act differently – in terms of expectations about the young people, awareness of Indigenous issues, and appreciation of each other. It could be argued that the mentoring program and the relationships developed provided a context for the development of motivation to participate and connect by a range of participants. Thus in many of the sites, the programs contributed to community building and the possibility of ongoing change in the educational outcomes for the young people.

In summary, the mentoring provided:

- For students - a 'space' to think and act differently;
- For mentors - an opportunity to get to know Indigenous young people (in a different way);
- For family - an opportunity to connect with school; and
- For teachers - an opportunity to develop different expectations of students and families.

Further research is warranted in considering the role mentoring programs might play in the educational change process through the participation of a range of people important in the lives of the young people concerned.

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