

The Role of Befriending and Mentoring in the Reintegration Journey of Ex-offenders

Rehabilitation and Reintegration for Ex-offenders

In a review that examined the approaches taken in the criminal justice landscape and the correctional environment since the 1960s until recent years in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, it is indicated that peer-support and volunteer groups have an important role to play in contributing towards meeting offender rehabilitation and re-entry needs and helping ex-offenders break away from their criminal lifestyle (Hornby, 2012). It is important to note however from the onset that there is no one pathway to the rehabilitation and reintegration for the ex-offender. Indeed, it takes a combination of approaches including offender assessment and treatment, support of the community to support the offender's reintegration into society, as well as the personal choice and determination to turn away from his/her criminal past and live life anew (Hornby, 2012).

Whilst befriending and mentoring play significant roles in supporting offenders, other measures must be implemented together with these services in working towards breaking the re-offending cycle (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011b). Research has shown that an integrated approach works best for significant reductions in re-offending, such as using mentoring as one of a number of interventions with offenders, besides having measures including education and employment programmes and behaviour modification programmes (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011b).

Definition of Befriending and Mentoring

In most literature on the topic of befriending and mentoring, the terms 'befriending' and 'mentoring' are usually used interchangeably. The reason being that both involve developing a one-to-one relationship whereby an individual, who is neither a friend or family member, volunteers to give his/her time to support and encourage the recipient, usually through face-to-face meetings (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011b). However, the main difference between the two is that there is an emphasis on goals in mentoring. Indeed, mentoring is a time-limited and goal-oriented process, focused on providing support for the mentee's learning and development, although it has social elements to the relationship. In contrast, befriending involves the development of a more informal and supportive social relationship over a longer duration and the achievement of goals are not the main focus, unlike in mentoring. In more recent times however, befriending and mentoring have expanded beyond the traditional one-to-one relationship through face-to-face meetings to include other models such as e-mentoring and group mentoring. The choice of the method through which mentoring is conducted will depend on factors such as the person with whom it is used, the reason why and where it is supposed to take place (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011b).

This paper aims to look at befriending and mentoring services provided for the reintegration of ex-offenders in the present milieu and to consider how these practices could be applicable for Singapore's context. While this paper offers neither a comprehensive nor an exhaustive search of all literature on the topic, it aims to provide a broad consideration of existing literature on the issue that could be found in the public domain.

Significance of Befriending and Mentoring Services in Ex-offenders' Lives

According to research on the benefits of befriending, many individuals in the community who are excluded in one way or another from participation in social and community life, can be supported through befriending services provided by voluntary agencies to become more involved and integrated in society (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). Individuals who are supported through befriending services, such as the elderly and ex-offenders, are usually socially isolated and beneficiaries may regard their befriender as a friend and enjoy the joint activities of leisure together. Volunteers are usually the ones delivering the befriending service and to recipients of the service, the fact that the befriender chooses to spend time with them on a voluntary basis rather than out of professional or other obligations, is what really matters to them. While the suitability of volunteers is assessed through various means and training for befrienders may differ among agencies due to different needs of clientele groups, the matching of the volunteer and the user of befriending services is dependent on various factors such as age, gender, interests, personality and availability of the volunteer (Dean & Goodlad, 1998).

Although in a number of countries such as New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Hong Kong (Carruthers, 2011; Hornby, 2012; Tai, 2000) there is the acknowledgement of the importance of community involvement in corrections programmes and community-based programmes that help offenders to re-enter and settle back into society, there is scarce in-depth studies on the impact and efficacy of the types of community involvement in offenders' and ex-offenders' reintegration journey. Likewise, limited information could be located for the purpose of this paper in gaining a better understanding of the influence and effectiveness of befriending and/or mentoring services specifically for the offenders/ ex-offenders populace.

To date, there is a lack of good quality research evidence on the effect of mentoring projects for offenders. At best, existing studies suggest that certain types of mentoring may affect re-offending by means of functioning as a 'bridge' to other services and providing continued support for the offender mentees (Taylor, Burrowes, Disley, Liddle, Maguire, Rubin & Wright, 2013). There is also limited evidence to show that mentoring programmes will help offenders to reduce their pro-criminal attitudes and improve their coping abilities, as well as their peer and family relationships (Taylor et al., 2013).

According to the current body of research on befriending and mentoring, it is suggested that they can have a positive impact on offending behaviour. However, where mentoring is one of several interventions used for dealing with offending behaviour, it is difficult to isolate and determine the extent of impact that mentoring offers (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011a). Current evidence suggests that the influence of mentoring is most obvious when engaging offenders in work, education and training opportunities. However, evidence of the impact of mentoring on re-offending is mixed at best, with some studies suggesting a statistically positive impact of mentoring on re-offending while others do not have similar findings. In general, research has indicated that mentoring demonstrates promise for positive influence on offending behaviour, but further large-scale research is required to ascertain details of the effects of mentoring (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011a).

It is also essential to note that different organizations employ different methods to measure and evaluate the outcome and impact of mentoring projects. The range of methods

used can include case studies, verbal discussions, quality standard studies, evaluations, surveys, cost savings, as well as informal feedback from the mentor and/or the mentee (Clinks & Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2012). Given that there are numerous differences in approaches in examining the impact of mentoring projects, it is also difficult to compare studies conducted thus far on the topic and to have a more thorough understanding of the effects of mentoring on offenders/ ex-offenders.

Mentoring and Befriending Programmes in the United Kingdom

For the purpose of this paper, a few befriending and/or mentoring programmes in the United Kingdom will be highlighted, in order to obtain some insights into various factors that may affect the reintegration of ex-offenders. The reason for bringing up these programmes is because mentoring has been integrated as a formal method of intervention in the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom, which is not seen as extensively elsewhere.

In the United Kingdom, mentoring has been widely used as a form of intervention in the criminal justice system and although different approaches may be used in mentoring, all of them share the same goal of supporting offenders to cease offending and assisting them to improve their positive life outcomes (National Offender Management Service, 2011). Specifically, the National Offender Management Service in the United Kingdom is involved in the administration of mentoring as a formal means of intervention besides implementing other conventional offender management interventions. Mentoring in their context is viewed as a learning relationship between two people whereby one individual passes his/her knowledge to the other over a period of time. The form in which this takes place may range from a formal and structure approach for specific purposes such as guiding an offender to be ready for a job to a more unstructured and general support, which is usually known as befriending (National Offender Management Service, 2011).

There are more than 1500 organizations in the United Kingdom that work with offenders and their families and more than 7000 volunteers are involved in the criminal justice system. As at 2010, there are about 100 schemes in the community and voluntary sector which offer befriending or mentoring services to offenders on probation or in prison. The government has a blueprint relating to the reintegration of ex-offenders and this includes extending mentoring to include offenders helping other offenders, besides involving members of the public to reach out to and assist offenders (National Offender Management Service, 2011). Examples of mentoring programmes include the HMP Spring Hill, which has the prisoner-to-prisoner mentoring around drug and alcohol misuse, as well as the North Wales Probation's Waves (Wales Alliance of Volunteers Engaging with Services) programme that involves mentoring by public volunteers and ex-offenders.

Many organizations also offer their own mentoring services, which are usually local initiatives developed by their own communities, which offenders access and use (National Offender Management Service, 2011). For instance, one of the most established and largest prisoner peer support schemes is the Samaritan-trained Listener Scheme. Listeners act as Samaritans inside the prison, providing emotional support service to other prisoners, especially for those who are suicidal. The Samaritans still train and support Listeners in numerous establishments in Wales and England (National Offender Management Service, 2011).

Likewise, the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) is another established charity organization which has been set up to focus solely on the provision, development and support of mentoring and befriending. The number of befriending and mentoring projects is large and the MBF is in contact with more than 3500 individual schemes. Goals of each project differ and the focus of schemes include reducing unwanted behaviour such as drug abuse and criminal activity, behavioural change involving building social skills and confidence, developing life skills, as well as reducing isolation and increasing opportunities to be involved in community activities. The projects may take place in prisons, the community or in schools (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2011b).

Over the years, the involvement of offenders in peer support roles has also been increasingly recommended by the government in the United Kingdom as the central means to ensure continued support for offenders released. However, the evidence-base outcome for this area of mentoring has been scarce and many studies on the use of offenders in peer support roles have been done by those who are enthusiastic to advocate for its value (Fletcher & Batty, 2012). Nevertheless, the government in the United Kingdom has proceeded to embark on peer support schemes involving offenders as peer mentors for offenders in an extensive way (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

Discussion of Implications & Suggestions

The above review of existing literature on the topic holds important considerations for befriending and volunteer services provided for offenders and ex-offenders by various agencies in Singapore, since the involvement of the community and volunteers as befrienders and mentors in various agencies is extensive (Leo, 2012; Singapore Prison Service, 2013 & 2015).

As mentioned earlier, although existing research and literature on the benefits of befriending and mentoring are mixed, the preliminary results have shown promise that these services have a positive impact on offenders breaking the re-offending cycle. What stands out in current evidence regarding mentoring is that it may be most effective or useful when it starts in prison and continues beyond the offender's release. Likewise, mentoring is also most likely to be beneficial when the relationship between the mentor and the mentee is sustained over a period of time rather than just involving only one or two sessions (Ministry of Justice, 2013). In this regard, the through-care approach which is practiced in Singapore involving volunteers who provide befriending and/or mentoring services in the in-care and after-care phases of the offender's rehabilitation is in line with research evidence on what is effective in terms of the service's duration, as well as the continuity of the service.

However, little is known about the specifics of what works and what does not work so well for the benefit of the recipient in befriending and mentoring services. This is the same likewise in the context of Singapore. There has not been any consistently clear delineation in current literature between mentoring and befriending. It is thus pertinent for future research to be highly specific and the scope of the research to be focused on particular aspects of befriending and/or mentoring, so that findings of the services could be better understood.

Another consideration for the local context is the development of a common framework and definitions for measuring the influence of befriending and mentoring by both government and non-government agencies. This could help facilitate future research on this area of work and enable replication of the study where required for long-term research. Also, it will be interesting to consider whether mentoring schemes which are focused on developing specific areas of skills or interests could be implemented alongside the current scheme of befriending services in Singapore's after-care context.

In addition, insofar that in Singapore the philosophy of the reintegration of ex-offenders involves the family as the first line of support, it is also important to note that there are still individuals who may not have strong family support after they are released back into society. Given this possibility, it is hence important to consider how effective is the current model of befriending services in the local context and how these services could be improvised to better meet the needs of the ex-offender, so that he/she will turn away from their old lifestyles.

Lastly, it is of interest that offenders are involved heavily as peer mentors in peer mentoring schemes for offenders/ ex-offenders in the United Kingdom. The feasibility of such a scheme in Singapore is food for thought and it will be interesting to consider whether a formal structure for such a scheme could be set up as a pilot scheme. According to the government in the United Kingdom, their perspective is that the mentoring of offenders is one of the most promising conduits to rehabilitation in the present criminal justice system. It is also this belief that guides rehabilitation practice in their national policy and strategy of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) Programme, initiated by the Ministry of Justice (Aitken, 2014). As part of their national programme, many non-government organizations work in collaboration with the government to implement mentoring programmes for offenders and ex-offenders, which also includes peer mentoring programmes involving ex-offenders as mentors. One such instance is the London Peer Mentoring Service for men (Catch22, 2015).

The London Peer Mentoring Service provides support for offenders such that they comply with their community sentences and helps reduce the re-offending risk through a mentor's support (Catch22, 2015). Mentoring is provided by peer ex-offenders for a period of at least six months whilst the offenders are subject to an intensive community order. The focus of the mentoring scheme is to meet personal and emotional needs of the offenders, as well as other practical concerns such as accommodation, in order to assist their community reintegration (Catch22, 2015). Non-government organizations such as Catch22 and St Giles Trust are in partnership with the London Probation Trust to provide this peer mentoring service by ex-offenders in four London boroughs to young adult offenders subjected to Intensive Community Orders. When an offender is referred to be assigned a peer mentor, Catch22 or St Giles Trust will initiate contact with the offender's manager within five working days to conduct a meeting between the manager, the offender and the assigned peer mentor. A support plan together with other details such as the frequency and the format of communication between the manager and the mentor will be arranged during the meeting.

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