

From Beneficiary to Peer Mentor

Introduction

Previous literature has shown that former offenders who provide practical and psychological support to other ex-offenders allow them to avoid offending and reintegrate themselves into society (TSIP, 2013). Very little is currently known about the practice of using offenders as peer mentors. This is because offender peer interventions are both innovative and a relatively recent development. This literature review aims to look at studies that examined the use of peer interventions as a rehabilitation process and how successful these programs are. The literature review below has yielded evaluations of different peer mentoring programs that were done mostly in the United Kingdom.

In recent years, there has been much focus in the United Kingdom on programs that encourage former offenders to volunteer as mentors to current offenders with the primary aim of reducing levels of re-offending. In the United Kingdom, there is strong government endorsement of rehabilitation initiatives for offenders and former offenders as an effort to reduce recidivism rates in the United Kingdom (The Daily Mail, 2012). According to the UK government's figures in 2012, 6 out of 10 offenders returned to crime within nine years (ibid.). Thus, the UK government adopts different methods to ensure recidivism rates will be low and this includes introducing ex-offenders as mentors to current offenders.

In the United Kingdom, the deployment of offenders in peer mentoring has been increasingly viewed by the UK government as a key means of ensuring continuity of support for those released from prison, making mainstream services go further; and providing employment opportunities for those displaying an aptitude for such roles. Peer mentoring is deeply entrenched in the United Kingdom because the UK Ministry of Justice has established an ambitious reform program known as Transforming Rehabilitation which aims to transform the way offenders are managed in the community to achieve a reduction in the rate of reoffending. The next section will examine research studies that have been conducted in the United Kingdom.

Studies in the United Kingdom

There are several research studies in the United Kingdom that highlight the importance of peer mentoring in the aftercare sector. In the United Kingdom, there are more than 100 mentoring projects that adopt the use of the peer mentoring concept in their projects (Prince's Trust, 2008). The UK Prison Survey conducted in 2008 showed that young people want support from those who have had similar experiences to their own (ibid.). These young people immediately identify with former offenders and a degree of trust is built almost automatically. Former offenders can be an invaluable source of information and provide knowledge to other mentors who can benefit from their experience.

Two well-established prisoner peer support schemes will be discussed in this paper. The largest and best-established prisoner peer support scheme is the Samaritan-trained Listener scheme. Listeners are selected prisoners who act as Samaritans inside the prison providing confidential and emotional support service to other prisoners especially to those who are suicidal (NOMS, 2011). Listeners are trained and supported by Samaritans who are volunteers from society. The Listeners assist in

preventing suicide, reducing self-harm and help alleviate the feelings of their fellow prisoners who are in distress.

In a study by Jaffe (2011) which examines the Samaritan-trained Listener scheme, the Listener role is undoubtedly more complex due to the confidential nature of their contact with the fellow prisoners. At times, it becomes burdensome to come to terms with the disclosures made to them by prisoners. Prisoners had essentially 'off-loaded' their problems onto Listeners and Listeners needed a forum to be able to 'off-load' too. This is where supportive structures are crucial as the Listeners require regular de-briefing meetings with the Samaritans.

Another organisation that is employing former offenders is St Giles Trust. St Giles Trust works with offenders and disadvantaged people and almost one-third of their staff are former offenders. Former offenders are offered a job brokerage service and employment support by St Giles Trust. The St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project trains serving prisoners to NVQ Level 3 in Information, Advice and Guidance who provide an advice service to their fellow inmates as part of the vocational element of their course (Boyce et. al., 2009). This project means they are able to reach large numbers of inmates who require advice and support and also gain a qualification which can help boost their employability upon release.

This project has three key elements. Firstly, the project aims to advance the skills and employability of prisoners by offering a recognised qualification (National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)) before they are release from prison. Second, the ST Giles Trust provides a housing advice service to a number of prisons in London and the South of England. Thirdly, as well as peer advice in prison, St Giles Trust offers employment experience on their release from custody via their involvement in mentoring schemes.

The Peer Advice Project tests out the concept that prisoners themselves can be an important resource in the rehabilitation and resettlement processes and thus serve as a counterbalance to the widespread belief that programmes are something that are done for offenders by specialists. This Project emphasizes prisoners' agency where giving up offending is an active choice made by offenders which is an important ingredient in the rehabilitation process. Ex-offenders are trained to be peer advisers for this project. As part of the project, they were employed as staff to be peer advisers to prisoners who will soon be released. They were given employment by the St Giles Trust.

Strengths of this project

An important aspect of the St Giles Trust service is that it offers peer mentors a recognisable qualification which can be use beyond prison. Employment opportunities were found to give the mentors structure in their lives and occupy them in a useful way. Mentors also praised the ethos of the organisation, not only for employing ex-offenders and seeing their potential, but for fostering a culture whereby they were not stigmatised, but treated as equals. Offenders gained many benefits from involvement in the scheme and their participation was often motivated by a desire to provide support to their peers. However, the success of the Peer Advice service can be dependent on prison staff at all levels, from the Governor to the wing officer, and regular promotion of the scheme helps ensure that new members of prison staff and other agencies working in the prison are aware of the service.

Limitations of St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project

This project provided the peer mentors the opportunity for work experience in the community. However, this is limited by the short-term nature of the funding and often the timing of grants received was an important factor to who received access to this employment. This limited funding may cause disappointment to some offenders who would like to volunteer or work for the Trust yet they were told that there were no volunteer or employment placements available at the time of their release.

The ethos of St Giles Trust, particularly their acceptance of ex-offenders and belief in their potential, makes for a very positive working environment. Yet this also creates some anxiety about moving on to the wider job market. In order to free-up space for newly released prisoners and extend access to community placements and keep this process on-going, it seems important to time-limit placements and continue to focus on how offenders might gain employment elsewhere.

Apart from the St Giles Trust, there are other projects in the United Kingdom that adopt the concept of peer mentoring as part of the rehabilitation process for inmates. The Straight to Work project employs former offenders trained in prison to provide intensive resettlement support for newly released prisoners, helping them with practical issues such as housing, finances, training and employment. The caseworkers meet the prisoners at the gates on the day of release and provide ongoing, flexible support for as long as necessary.

St Giles Trust's SOS Project trains and employs reformed ex-offenders as caseworkers, who provide practical and psychological support to their ex-offender clients. The caseworkers themselves are the biggest strength of the SOS Project. Their commitment, willingness to challenge their clients and ability to address their attitudes and behaviours whilst still providing support are integral to the SOS Project's work. Clients most frequently mentioned support from SOS workers and the information, advice and guidance given as the most valuable parts of the SOS Project. There is a strong alignment between the SOS caseworkers' approach and staff behaviour that are expected to have a positive effect on ex-offenders, particularly the most high-risk.

The Prince's Trust Working one-to-one with Young Offenders project enables former offenders to support young offenders through their transition from custody to the community. The former offenders who developed the project chose the term 'supporter' instead of 'mentor' (Prince's Trust, 2008). On a monthly basis, a team of supporters deliver an inspirational talk to a group of young offenders who are in custody; sharing their own experience of offending behaviour, prison and their eventual motivation to change for the better (ibid.). The primary aim is to inspire young offenders so that they too can turn their life around and live successfully. Once matched, supporters visit their clients in custody, meet them at the gate upon their release and support them in the community. The project works because young offenders identify with the supporters' experiences and trust is developed almost immediately. The peer mentors in all the programs stated above received a substantial amount of training before they are qualified to be a mentor to the current offenders.

Current findings on peer mentoring

Findings on current literature on peer mentoring highlights the strengths and weaknesses of having ex-offenders as mentors. According to Fletcher and Batty (2012), peer mentors need to possess and

display a positive attitude and be good listeners as well as have the ability to communicate their ideas and feelings in a positive and non-judgemental way. They also need to empathise with their fellow peers. Those that have already taken on helping roles are more likely to build positive relationships with mentees (Clayton, 2009). Offenders require training for taking on peer support roles. This need will vary according to the nature of the roles undertaken. Below are the three main roles and skills of peer mentors.

Roles and skills of peer mentors

1. Engaging 'hard to reach' groups
2. As positive role models
3. Provide counselling and other emotional support

Based on the current studies, there are five key strengths attributed to peer mentoring:

1. Peers are better at engaging offenders
2. Peers are more effective at sharing information and knowledge
3. Peers can act as successful role models
4. In custodial settings they can form pro-social communities that realise wider benefits
5. Peers can support managerial and front-line staff

Being peer mentors allow former offenders to develop their soft skills. Soft skills encompass a wide variety of workplace skills (Taylor, 2008). They are the kind of skills which are often taken for granted but are extremely important and one of the key things that employers look for. These skills include the ability to communicate and interact effectively with others, work well in a team, possess self-confidence and take responsibility. Thus, being a peer mentor allows former offenders to develop these skills which enable them to be more employable in the job market.

Furthermore, in a study by Morrison et. al. (2006), which looked into peer volunteering in Canada, the authors examined the benefits of engaging ex-offenders as peer volunteers and suggested methods for structuring peer volunteer programs. In this study, the key informant interviews with service providers and focus groups with ex-offenders has provided the authors with practical lessons learned from direct experience in community-based volunteer programs. They also provided detailed information related to the rationale for peer volunteer programs and their organization and implementation. They provided support for the benefits of peer volunteer programs but underscored that opportunities for ex-offenders to participate in these initiatives are limited. Key informants and focus group participants reported that efforts should be made to extend the capacity of community-based rehabilitation programs to undertake or develop peer volunteer activities. The findings from this research provided a range of possible suggestions, lessons and key actions that could help in the development and implementation of peer volunteer programs in community-based rehabilitation program for ex-offenders.

Weaknesses of peer mentoring

The literature also highlights seven weaknesses of peer mentoring:

1. The pool of individuals possessing the requisite experience, aptitude and skills may be small
2. High rates of peer turnover
3. Security breaches
4. Problems of competence and confidentiality
5. Difficulties maintaining appropriate boundaries
6. Underlying tensions with the peer role
7. Peers may require considerable support

Firstly, the pool of offenders with the necessary experience, aptitude and skills may be small. Young offenders may not be emotionally ready to mentor others and may lack the necessary attributes. Boyce et al (2009) highlighted that the selection criteria employed by the St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project severely restricted the pool of suitable offenders. Secondly, programmes are often characterised by high rates of peer turnover which can undermine sustainability. Scott et al (2004) emphasized that program continuity was hindered by high rates of peer attrition resulting from transfers, releases and disciplinary cases. Some peer mentors are dismissed because of security breaches. This would include positive drug tests, unauthorised movement around prison and having possession of mobile phones (Boyce et al., 2009). For example, the Listening Scheme is a peer support system developed by the HM Prison Service and the Samaritan's that trains prisoners to listen in confidence to those experiencing psychological and emotional distress to prevent self-harm or suicide. Every year, a small number of Listeners are dismissed for passing drugs or mobile phones around prisons (Foster, 2011).

Foster (2011) also highlighted that the emotional responsibility of listening to distressed prisoners and maintaining confidentiality may be difficult for some peer mentors. Apart from that the boundaries between the peer mentor and the prisoners may be blurred as peer mentors may develop friendships with clients that will make it difficult for them to separate support and friendship roles. Previous literature also highlights that peer programmes are complex to manage and may require considerable maintenance and support. They need trained and committed staff and may be labour and time intensive (Walker and Avis, 1999).

Inclusiveness has become a key issue in volunteering (Morrison et. al., 2006). Although different kinds of people volunteer, individuals who have participated in community-based rehabilitation programs or made transitions from justice or secure custodial settings are often under-represented in formal volunteering programs (ibid.). Some agencies and program staff may not welcome ex-offender involvement in volunteering because of their past conflict with the law. This can also be seen in the St Giles Peer Advice project and the Samaritan-trained Listener scheme in the UK which will be discussed in the next section, in which peer advisers reported that they received hostile treatments from people they worked with when they found out the advisers were former prisoners. Ex-offenders may lack formal volunteer experience and as a result may not think that volunteering is relevant to their present lives. Barriers to volunteering include having to make a commitment to regular regimented volunteer activities and a lack of confidence in new environments and relationships.

Discussion and Suggestions

The studies in the United Kingdom illustrate that there is full government support especially with policies being formulated by the Ministry of Justice. In 2012, the Secretary for the Ministry of Justice

pledged to recruit ex-offenders to be 'wise friends' to newly freed prisoners (The Daily Mail, 2012). These former offenders will wait for inmates at the prison gate to offer them mentoring on how to stay on the right path without re-offending (ibid.). Using ex-offenders as peer mentors is part of the UK government's plan for a 'rehabilitation revolution' to reduce re-offending rates (ibid.). Apart from that, charities, private firms and organisations that adopt the peer mentoring scheme either through volunteering or offering it as part of employment will receive funding from the government but they are required to hit pre-agreed targets to reduce recidivism amongst former offenders.

In order for the peer mentoring scheme to be successful in Singapore, there needs to be strong government support and endorsement in using former offenders as mentors. Several factors which will be discussed below have to be taken into consideration when organisations adopt the peer mentoring scheme.

Mentoring should begin at the earliest possible moment in the journey of an offender. This would mean that the mentoring relationship should begin when the offender is still in the prison and not at the gate (Aitken, 2014). The first priority is to recruit and train good quality mentors and have a good mentoring model to adhere to. In order to get a group of good quality mentors, one need to consider the type of offence the person had committed before and it must not be a high-risk offence. Selection procedure for a peer mentor has to ensure that the organisation recruits 'lower risk' offenders with good conduct when they were in prison (Boyce et. al., 2009). For example, former offenders need to submit to a voluntary drug test, have basic literacy skills, be on good behaviour for at least 6 months after release and are financially stable and excited to do mentoring (ibid.). Apart from that, a large pool of mentors is required to ensure that there will be an ongoing peer mentoring programme. Maintaining this pool of mentors maybe difficult as there will be some people who will drop out of the programme since the peer mentoring scheme is part of a voluntary programme. One has to bear in mind that mentoring is a process which is not cheap (Aitken, 2014). Organisations which want to adopt the peer mentoring scheme or mentoring in general need to have an adequate amount of funding from the government or any related organisations. However, if the organisation receives a large amount of funding, it may want to offer these mentors full-time employment as seen in the St Giles Trust mentioned in the earlier section.

Because of previous offences, placements that require involvement with or access to specific vulnerable populations may not be appropriate for some ex-offenders. Criminal checks and personal disclosures can ensure that volunteers and program participants are not placed in positions of risk. Devilly et. al. (2005) asserts that peer volunteers should be adequately trained to fulfil their assigned responsibilities. Failure to prepare volunteers leaves them open to negative reactions from both program participants and staff members. Comprehensive training may last for one week or longer and may include a wide range of instructional themes and should be tailored to the unique needs of the agency which is providing the service.

Devilly et. al. (2005) also highlights the difficulties associated with directly monitoring peer volunteer and client interactions. However, organizations which adopt the peer mentoring program should have in place mechanisms for peer volunteer supervision and support. The process of supervision should be comfortable for volunteers and should allow them to share their concerns or seek assistance from the relevant people in the scheme. Some approaches include scheduling regular meetings during which peer volunteers may seek consultation from program staff on issues related

to the peer mentoring. These consultation opportunities are critical in ensuring the safety and welfare of both the volunteers and the peers they serve.

Peer mentoring initiatives should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are efficient and effective. Continuous relevant information gathering and review provide the means to be accountable to program users, peer volunteers, personnel and community stakeholders (Aitken, 2014). There are 3 types of program evaluation which may be considered.

1. Program monitoring

In this evaluation, information is often gathered through daily activity records that document the nature of the volunteer service delivered; the location; duration; type of support provided; and the extent to which the service was helpful to clients (ibid.). This evaluation provides feedback on the daily operations of the peer mentoring program.

2. Process evaluation

Process evaluation may make use of the data gathered from program monitoring and may supplement this data with interviews with clients, volunteers, program staff and other stakeholders (Devilly et. al., 2005). This evaluation focuses on how effectively the volunteer service is being implemented and to what extent it reflects the assumptions, objectives and activities of the original program design (Aitken, 2014).

3. Outcome evaluation

Outcome evaluation is a collection of follow-up data over time and compares with other programs. This evaluation investigates the short-term, medium-term and long-term impact of the peer mentoring program. This can include the positive changes in the clients and peer volunteers.

Peer mentoring scheme is an initiative that encourages former offenders to reform to be a better person as it teaches skills such as the soft skills required to communicate with other people and make them more employable to attract future employers. Aside from that, the peer mentors can be seen as a role model to other offenders and motivate the other prisoners not to return to their old ways. In order for peer mentoring to be successful and sustaining in Singapore, factors such as a large amount of funding, strong support and endorsement from the government or any other related organisations. Furthermore, there should be a large pool of well-trained and well behaved mentors; and continuous evaluation of the program should be done. Organisations which want to implement the peer mentoring initiatives need to consider the factors that have been highlighted in this paper in order to have a sustaining long-term programme.

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