

Perspectives on Evaluating a Pilot Program for Young Offenders

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Abstract

This paper examines the methodological and operational challenges of a three year multi-site evaluation of a pilot program for young offenders. It examines these challenges from the perspective of the evaluator, the commissioner of the evaluation and the service provider.

The pilot program was funded by the NSW government to explore the effectiveness of mentoring with young offenders referred by Police or Youth Justice Conferences (YJC). The program was piloted at two locations, a metropolitan site in western Sydney, and a rural site on the NSW north coast.

The paper also examines the impact of the evaluation process on the program's provider and other stakeholders, including the capacity building in evaluation that occurred for the program providers during the evaluation. It also reflects on the lessons learnt regarding evaluation of pilot programs, including the importance of managing stakeholder expectations and building partnerships with critical players.

Key Words

Mentoring, Young Offenders, Formative Evaluation, Summative Evaluation, Capacity Building

Background to Pilot Program

In 1998 the NSW Attorney General's Crime Prevention Division and the Department of Juvenile Justice decided to pilot a mentoring program with young offenders. The initiative was in part because of a desire to complement the NSW Young Offenders Act 1997 which introduced new methods for diverting young offenders from the court system.

Mentoring has become a popular strategy for crime prevention in the USA, the UK and lately in Australia. Mentoring refers to a mutually beneficial relationship that involves a more experienced person helping a less experienced person. Its popularity stems from its intuitive appeal, ideas of grass roots community support, and its apparent cheapness. Mentoring has been used very widely with disadvantaged young people in the USA in particular.

The pilot program aimed to explore the effectiveness of mentoring with young offenders referred by Police or Youth Justice Conferences (YJC). Participation was voluntary, targeting young people who were interested in mentoring and had difficulties that a mentoring relationship could address.

The program was piloted by the YWCA of Sydney at two locations, a metropolitan site in western Sydney, and a rural site on the NSW north coast. The YWCA's program is based on the US Big Brother Big Sister movement. In line with the majority of mentoring programs for young people at risk, the YWCA's program targeted young people with family and social problems, typically in the 10-15 years age range.

Five NSW government agencies: the two funding bodies, NSW Police, the Department of Community Services (DOCS) and the Office of Children and Young People in the Cabinet Office. Representatives of these agencies, and from a youth sector NGO, formed the project's Steering Committee that provided oversight of the pilot program and the evaluation through quarterly meetings from 1999 until mid 2002.

The Evaluation

In March 1999, ARTD was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the pilot program over three years, with both formative and summative functions.

The formative function involved providing quarterly reports with data on referrals, participation and outcomes to the project's Steering Committee and the YWCA so issues could be identified and improvements made.

The summative function was to assess the effectiveness of the pilot projects in achieving outcomes for young offenders and to inform decisions about the potential replication of the program as a crime prevention strategy.

The Evaluators' Perspective - Methodological and Operational Challenges

The evaluation design

ARTD spent a lot of time working with the commissioners and the Steering Committee to develop a design that was feasible. An initial step was to clarify the program's objectives and assumptions. The stated objectives of the program were broad and covered outcomes such as reduced offending, reduced social isolation, greater access to services, reduced risk of harm associated with alcohol and other drugs, and improved educational and employment prospects.

The evaluators worked through different understandings of mentoring held by the YWCA and the commissioners – in particular whether mentoring was an end in itself (the goal of the YWCA's BSBB model) or goal-focussed case management (as often characterises social programs). ARTD drew on the literature and the YWCA's experience to derive a program logic that was acceptable to all parties. The program logic was used to shape the focus of the evaluation and to design methods and instruments.

Influenced by Steering Committee members with a criminological perspective, the original brief called for a quasi-experimental design that could compare a group of young people who had mentors with a control group. After consideration and drawing on evaluation theory, it was determined that such a design was impractical and inappropriate. In particular, it was argued that in the evaluation of such a pilot program, the primary purpose was to explore the likely outcomes rather than test assumed outcomes. To do this we used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, within a realist orientation. In addition to the quantitative monitoring data, methods included a comprehensive international review of the literature and related schemes, interviews with project stakeholders, and case studies of young people, their families and mentors.

ARTD then designed, piloted and monitored a range of instruments with the primary users responsible for data collection (police, project coordinators). ARTD was able to align the evaluation with the plans of the YWCA, maximising opportunities to work together whilst respecting our different interests particularly in relation to methods for monitoring and data collection, and accounting for the different possible interactions between the program and cautions and conferencing processes and at the two pilot sites.

Early in the period, the monitoring data was used to make decisions about expanding the catchment area and changing some of the referral procedures.

Anticipating possible ethical issues

While the program providers had primary responsibility for safeguarding all parties concerned in the mentoring processes, the evaluation consultants needed to have processes in place to deal with issues raised by the evaluation process itself. In particular, while any research involving direct engagement with young people needs to employ standard social research practices for *informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality*, this project also required explicit protocols for addressing other issues which could arise because of the nature of mentoring where volunteer adults are linked with vulnerable young people; targeting young offenders and the link with criminal justice issues; and the need for cultural sensitivities to ensure young people from Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds received fair and appropriate consideration.

Ethical issues highlighted in the design phase included:

- a pre/post evaluation design appeared to limit a young person's options (ie to go into a control rather than a treatment group);

- during interviews - dealing with indications of serious wrongdoing on the part of the young person (such as admission of further offences) or on the part of the mentor (such as abuse).

ARTD outlined a general approach to anticipate such issues as much as possible and ensure appropriate protocols were in place to minimise risk, noting that all our evaluation projects are conducted within the Australasian Evaluation Society's *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations*.

Responding to a developing program

The evaluation faced a fundamental challenge when it became clear towards the end of the first year that the program was far from meeting its original targets for referrals and matches. In our Interim Report, ARTD projected the number of matches and recommended revised targets, which the projects and Steering Committee concurred were realistic for the remainder of the pilot.

As a result of this, the evaluation changed considerably. Rather than the intended quantitative monitoring of matches, ARTD set up a quantitative monitoring of the much larger population of young people attending cautions and conferences to look for reasons behind the low numbers of referrals to the program, as well as comparing them with referral group, to check for biases and barriers. At the same time, our qualitative work shifted to exploring the organisational barriers to developing the program and recruiting volunteers.

The Steering Committee and service providers were very satisfied with the process of the evaluation and the final report because of the way it addressed the key policy issues and explored in-depth the experiences of the pilot projects and the outcomes achieved. A significant value for all the parties was that the evaluation got beneath the considerable rhetoric about mentoring to provide evidence of its actual impact with this target group.

Perspective of the Commissioner of the Evaluation

The views below are not necessarily those of the NSW Attorney General's Department but of a Senior Policy Officer within the Crime Prevention Division, the organisation that had originally commissioned the evaluation and co-funded the project with DJJ. Elizabeth Hill joined the Division in July 2000 and assisted in the management of the evaluation from that time until its completion in April 2002.

At the outset, it was clear that the evaluation would be useful in assisting the Departmental officers in their consideration of mentoring as a positive intervention with young offenders. Mentoring had long been seen as a panacea for a range of problems with young people and there were emotive and political reasons for hoping that the pilot projects would 'work' in reducing crime and re-offending patterns of young people in the two areas chosen. The evaluation team was effective in tempering bureaucratic enthusiasm for the idea of the project with more objective observations throughout the life of the pilot.

Regular reporting

The quarterly reporting by the evaluation team was useful to bring the attention of the Steering Committee the numbers of matches between young people and mentors and, more importantly, the evaluation team brought both perspective and an understanding of context to the consideration of the Steering Committee. As with many projects, the steering committee was initially optimistic and patient about the outputs of the project. Once past halfway through the three year pilot period however, the optimism turned sour as the real difficulties in finding enough volunteer mentors to make anywhere near the targeted matches became more apparent.

Throughout this period, the Steering Committee continued to meet and monitor the progress of the pilot projects with information from the YWCA as the program implementers and information from the evaluation team. The evaluation team maintained their impartiality and informed the Steering Committee about similar set-up difficulties in other mentoring projects in the USA and UK/Wales. This gave the Steering Committee some perspective on the achievements and failings of the project, without which, the pilot may have been abandoned for fear of spiralling costs and disappointing numbers.

The evaluation team also provided valuable information regarding the context of the two pilot projects. Some of this information emerged through the life of the project, when comparisons were made between the Parramatta 'urban' location and the Coffs/Clarence 'regional' location. More usefully, the understandings of context were drawn out by the evaluation team in their final report. Their conclusions regarding context are an important lesson for governments and service providers about the difficulty in labelling programs as 'effective' or fitting the mould of 'what works'. The conclusions regarding context are essential in any consideration of future replication of this project or any others.

Having the evaluation team as an impartial source of information throughout the pilot project was invaluable in maintaining a good working relationship between the service provider and the funder at the same time as providing the funder with accurate information about the pilot projects. Without such a 'go-between', the continued life of the project may have been endangered.

The evaluation of the pilot projects has been useful in laying to rest the notion that mentoring is a 'feel good' solution to all problems with young offenders, given the difficulties of volunteer recruitment and community context. But at the same time, the evaluation assisted in maintaining the life of the pilots by adding the values of clear reporting, providing international perspectives and informing the 'commissioners' of the pilots of the importance of context.

Scoping prior to a major evaluation

The necessity of mapping community capacity to assist in supporting a project as well as community need in requiring such a project is an important lesson for organisations funding such interventions and evaluations. Unfortunately, these pilot projects were insufficiently scoped at the outset, so that there were unrealistic expectations of the potential numbers of volunteers who would come forward to assist in mentoring young people. This is one aspect of the project we would have done differently, that is, have a scoping study undertaken before the locations were chosen so that capacity as well as need was measured.

For the wider audience of policy makers on the Steering Committee in the youth, juvenile justice and crime prevention areas, the evaluation provided guidelines as to where and how mentoring might work with different groups of young people. In particular, some commented that it provided them with credible evidence to deal with unsubstantiated claims about mentoring and demands to take on "quick fix" mentoring initiatives.

Following the dissemination of the evaluation findings, the commissioner will face the challenge of considering the positive benefits of mentoring for certain young people at the same time as recognising the difficulties in implementation and the best solutions of overcoming such difficulties to produce the best crime prevention outcomes for young people and communities alike.

Program Providers Perspective

As I had not been involved in an external evaluation process before, there were few expectations regarding the process aside from data collection, conclusions and recommendations. In practice, the evaluation provided a quality compilation of data, reflective of the program, its progress and implementation. Moreover, the evaluation processes were relatively unobtrusive and particularly responsive to the needs of the program, staff, and program participants.

An unexpected outcome of the evaluation was the support that the evaluation gave to the program through the reporting process to the funding bodies. By having factual and objective information provided by the evaluators, staff were able to provide the balance, what could be considered a "personal touch", in the reporting process without having to be consumed with the presentation of quantitative data. The evaluation was also imperative in providing valuable comparative information on the progressive stages of mentoring programs in general which maintained a realistic expectation of the program through out its pilot period.

The evaluators demonstrated a professional approach whilst being supportive and extremely patient during the collection of program data. The designed forms were often modified in response to feedback from not only program staff, but also referring organisations to the program, in an effort to make them more user friendly.

Contact was consistently maintained throughout this process and the personal approach taken by the evaluation staff (assisted by the establishment of positive relationships), which made the evaluation process so much easier. This resulted in staff feeling that their role in the provision of data was a mutually beneficial process rather than the forms being just another thing we had to fit into our busy schedules. While completing of data collection forms took time it was also a valuable tool we incorporated into our client review process.

Fieldwork managed sensitively and professionally

One of the concerns for program staff during any evaluation is gaining informed consent of participants and maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of sensitive information. The evaluators ensured that any breaches were avoided. Particularly during the site visit when an interviewer with substantial experience in youth work was engaged by ARTD to provide a more sensitive approach to the interviewing of young people on the program.

In addition to this all, all the parties involved including families and stakeholders were treated with respect and sensitivity with a non-judgmental approach. As a result of the site visit we had several parents and stakeholders enquire about aspects of the program on a broader scale, rather than seeing it as just a local community program. Some of the client enquiries included questions about how the program got started, if the program operated elsewhere in the state and what other organisations were involved. Stakeholders were more interested in additional information on mentoring and the programs future direction. Staff considered these enquiries significant, particularly for program participants, as it shifted their view of the program to a broader perspective rather than their individual involvement.

Building evaluation capacity

The evaluators assisted project staff to identify which data produced the most beneficial information and helped refine our own data collection. Our current referral form is modeled on the one used throughout the evaluation because it was simple to use and provided the most appropriate information for program staff throughout the induction process of young people and their families on to the program. The evaluation regularly provided an 'aerial' snapshot of the program which was beneficial for staff on the ground, who don't have the advantage of resources to be able to see the program in this way on a regular basis.

The program also gained valuable insight into its strengths and weaknesses, which has been, and will continue to be used, during periods of program review and planning.

In conclusion, the evaluation has shown us strategies that enable us to reach better solutions and program outcomes through the identification of recurrent issues not only for our local program but also for mentoring programs in general. Things like the importance of maintaining a clear picture of our core focus area and regularly reviewing the activities that involves. Ensuring that program information provided to program participants and stakeholders is clear and consistent so that a realistic expectation can be maintained for the program. Healthier matches and increased client engagement were achieved when additional support is provided to the young person and their family. These are just some of the valuable insights gained through the evaluation process that enables the program's success to continue.