

Peer Mentors as Partners in the Leaving Care Process: Evaluation of a Western Australian Initiative

Michael Clare and Dr Paul Murphy

The Department of Social Work and Social Policy
The University of Western Australia
Nedlands, Western Australia 6907

Introduction

In Australia, about 1000 young people leave State Care annually, either formally when they attain eighteen years of age (occasionally younger) or informally by removing themselves from care. The project reported in this paper seeks to extend the internationally recognised *Looking After Children* Case Management system by providing life-skills education together with a peer mentor for young people preparing to leave State Care. By monitoring their progress to independent living, the project sought to identify and address some of the acknowledged difficulties faced by these young people.

The project was funded by the ANZ Foundation, and was a joint endeavour by a team from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Western Australia, the Western Australian Association of Young People in Care [WAAYPIC], and (the Department of) Family and Children's Services.

Background of the Project

In Australia, the State's legal responsibility as the 'corporate parent' ceases formally when young people in State Care attain eighteen years of age. Thus each year about 1,000 young people nationally are assumed to have achieved a level of self-sufficiency and independence such that the corporate parent has no further liability for their welfare. This situation is in stark contrast to the interdependency of most young people in the same cohort who are either still living at home or in close contact with their parents, and who continue to receive financial and emotional support together with 'revolving door' access to secure familial accommodation, often until their mid-20s (Jones, 1995; Maunders, Liddell, Liddell and Green, 1999).

Many studies and reports into the leaving care process have documented the downward spiral of unwanted pregnancies, unemployment, homelessness, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, admission to psychiatric care, crime, and suicide which many 'care graduates' experience (Biehal, Clayden, Stein and Wade, 1994; Broad, 1994; DOH, 1996; Horrocks and Waters, 1996; Ward, 1995). Although most of these research studies originate from the United Kingdom, similar problems are documented in Australian report and research (ALRC and HREOC, 1997; Cashmore and Paxman, 1996; Clare, 1995; Clare and Peerless, 1996; Maunders et al., 1999; Mendes and Goddard, 1999; Taylor, 1990; Wise, 1999, 1998).

One response to enhancing the long-term prospects of these children and young people has been the development of the *Looking After Children* documentation system for case managers responsible for the well-being of children in State Care. This system was developed in the United Kingdom following the publication of major research studies critical of the out-of-home care system, and it establishes national standards for the corporate parent. The system has been adopted by most British agencies responsible for the care of children and young people.

The documentation system was evaluated for use in Western Australia during 1996 by a research team at the (then) School of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Western Australia (Clare and Peerless, 1996). This team has recently been contracted to advise on the implementation of the *Looking After Children* system throughout this State.

However, the concerns for young people leaving the 'care system' remain largely unaddressed, and there is still a perception by the various representatives of the corporate parent that 'leaving care' is an event rather than a process (AGWA, 1998:14; ALRC and HREOC, 1997:79; Cashmore and Paxman, 1996:167; Jones, 1995:35).

Leaving Care Schemes

Unlike the United Kingdom *Children Act 1989* which requires the State to "advise, assist and befriend" young people leaving care (Stein, 1991; The Children's Society, 1992), there is no corresponding liability on the State(s) in Australia to provide ongoing support for care graduates (Maunder et al., 1999). Smith (1994) reviewed a number of Leaving Care schemes which have been trialled (principally in the United Kingdom), and also the disparate approaches to the types of support provided during the leaving care process. She also noted the dearth of research into this vital aspect of the State's responsibility for the long-term prospects of 'corporate children'.

Bath (1994) reported a similar fragmented situation within the Australian States and, as documented by Maunder et al. (1999:27), this care confusion continues.

One potential strategy emerging from research into the leaving care process is that of reconnecting young people with one, or more, member(s) of their wider kinship network. However, in many cases, this may be neither possible nor desirable. It seemed that an alternative approach might be to establish a personal community through contact with other care graduates, primarily members of WAAYPIC. Aldgate (1994:267) refers to this as a "stability family".

Peer Mentors – The Concept

Some of the Leaving Care models recommend establishing social workers or youth workers as mentors to provide professional support for young people leaving care (ALRC and HREOC, 1997:73; DOH, 1996:26). Indeed amendments to the UK legislation (the *Care Standards Bill* and the *Children (Leaving Care) Bill*) make explicit provision, among other things, for a "Young Person's Advisor" (BAAF News, 2000). Maunder et al. (1999:70) note that models such as the *Big Brother - Big Sister* programmes (currently operating in some Australian States) are potentially useful sources of mentor support.

The project reported in this paper sought to train volunteer care graduates to act as peer mentors. Rather than an advocate (as envisaged by the UK legislation), the primary role of the peer mentors in this project was seen as being a source of support during the transition to independent living, especially when young people face the difficulties of isolation and loneliness after they leave care. This involvement of peer mentors was the innovative aspect of the project, and placed the project at the forefront of international efforts to improve the life-chances of young people leaving State Care.

An ancillary aim of the project was that the availability of a mentor would result in someone taking an interest in the young person's transition to independent living after they leave the care of the corporate parent to face the world on their own.

The pilot programme was developed within a formal research framework, and this component of the project will add to the growing body of knowledge into the transition process of care graduates to independent living.

It was also hoped that the project might:

- inform documentation and administrative systems within relevant agencies;
- provide clear guidelines for social work and welfare practitioners, policy makers, and carers about the requirements for successful transition to independent living; and
- inform the development of a 'Leaving Care Guide'.

Aim of the Project

The aim of the project was to pilot and evaluate an strategy to support young people making the transition from State Care to independent living by:

- providing young people with information on areas such as legal issues, obtaining accommodation, employment and vocational training, health, and money management; and
- connecting the young people with a peer mentor to assist their transition to independence.

Ten young people in the process of leaving care volunteered to participate in the series of six 'life-skills' information workshops which were addressed by 'experts' from the relevant sectors — including the project sponsor, the ANZ (Bank) Foundation. Five volunteers from WAAYPIC also trained to be mentors.

The Processes

The State Co-ordinator of WAAYPIC developed and conducted the two concurrent training programmes — life-skills information workshops for the young people preparing to leave care, and those for the volunteer mentors.

Information Workshops

The workshops were developed after consultation with a number of young people preparing to leave care together with some care graduates. These consultations identified what the young people considered important (and what was not), what they feared, current issues such as whether they were obtaining support (or not), and what their expectations were.

A Steering Committee also advised on aspects of the workshop content. The Manager of *McDonalds* in the Perth Theatre Centre offered the use of a section of the restaurant, free of charge. He also provided refreshments at discounted costs for all of the seminars — an attraction which was especially welcomed by the young people who attended the workshops.

Seven workshops (each of approximately two hours in duration) were held at fortnightly intervals. The first evening was an informal introductory session designed to engender a supportive learning environment. Each of the subsequent workshops was addressed by two 'experts' who spoke on subjects such as: legal issues and individual rights; money matters, banking, and accessing various financial services; accommodation options; health, hygiene, personal fitness, and relaxation; and employment and training.

The seventh, and final, evening was a celebration of the project which was attended by the Hon. Ray Halligan MLC (representing the Minister for Family and Children's Services — the corporate parent), senior staff from Family and Children's Services, some of the 'experts' (including the funding sponsor), some members of the Fremantle Dockers and Perth Breakers sports teams, peer mentors, and the young people who had participated in the project.

The young people engaged with all of the presenters, and raised issues which were of direct concern to themselves. The workshops served a three-fold purpose — dissemination of information, an insight into how various service organisations operate, and a chance to question knowledgeable people to clarify issues of concern.

The deep need for information was exemplified within five minutes of the funding agency's representatives commencing their presentation on 'money matters', when they were confronted with the query about bank fees:

"How come you bastards [sic] charge me \$26 a month for fees, when I only get about \$450 all up. That's a week's food money you're ripping me off for."

The ensuing lively discussion resulted in all of the young people who were present reporting during the subsequent evaluation that they had changed their method of using credit and cash access cards with the consequence that none of those interviewed have paid 'excess' bank fees for the past three months.

Another outcome reported by all of the young people was their increased confidence at querying information given by ‘front-desk’ staff in agencies and bureaucracies. The fact that organisations have their own language and use terms in different ways was a revelation to many of the participants. One young woman explained:

“Talking to the people from *Centrelink* [the Commonwealth Department of Social Security] was very interesting. I didn’t know they had their own terms for some things. It’s no wonder I couldn’t get information on what I wanted — I wasn’t speaking their language. I’ve been back since then, used the words they used at the meeting, and ‘bingo’ — I got what I’d been after for about six months — no problem. So, yeah, I’d have to say I learned something pretty good from them, and it worked when I tried it.”

Rather than merely accept decisions, the young people said that they now ask to speak to someone of higher authority to put their case. Typical comments from the interviews have included:

“It was really good that we got to know a bit about how the people in these various organisations operate, and the right words to use to cut through some of the crap [sic] — we can work things out much better now.”

“I got behind on my rent. I did exactly as they said at the meeting, and popped in to the agent and explained what had happened. They were pretty cool, and I’m paying the arrears off a bit each week. I would never have done that before and would probably have been chucked out.”

Perhaps the best recommendation for the workshops came from one of the older care graduates who observed:

“Most of the stuff didn’t apply directly to me because I’ve been looking after myself for a couple of years now. But I wish I’d known some of the stuff they talked about — I might have stayed on the ‘straight and narrow’ a bit more.”

All of the presenters provided detailed answers to all questions posed, and frequently suggested alternative strategies to the problems that were raised. This willingness to explain alternative options invariably led to lengthy discussions, and all of the workshops extended beyond the scheduled finishing time.

The young people who attended the workshops have reported not only enjoying the experience but stated that they had also learned things which they have since used to improve their situation.

One recommendation from a number of participants was the provision of some consolidated package of the information — a Leaving Care Guide.

“The stuff they talked about was really useful, but it would be nice if we had some sort of book-type thing that we could use later on. I tried to make notes but I don’t write very well. So I feel I might have missed something or won’t be able to remember it when the time comes. So, yeah, some sort of booklet thing would be real handy for me anyway.”

Mentor Training

Many care graduates within the WAAYPIC network were very supportive of the concept of peer mentors to assist the transition to independent living. An informal focus group of care graduates met and discussed issues, needs, and deficiencies in their experiences of leaving care. This information was used to develop a training event for the care graduates who volunteered to be mentors.

Mentoring project literature was researched (de Rosenroll, undated; Phillips-Jones, 1998), and the WAAYPIC State Co-ordinator completed a mentoring course with AAYPIC (since reconstituted as the *Create* Foundation).

The training concentrated on the skills required to initiate support, and related issues (such as establishing realistic boundaries, ensuring privacy, and reducing the temptation for dependency situations to develop too quickly).

In this pilot initiative, the volunteer mentors were all known personally to the State Co-ordinator of WAAYPIC, and there was little in the way of a formal selection or vetting process. This acknowledged calculated risk worked well for the pilot, and has provided a basis for future development in that the selection and vetting process of future mentors will be more formalised.

The mentors and the young people all completed forms which identified hobbies and similar background information which would facilitate the initial matching process. A 'Linking' BBQ was held and the respective 'matches' were introduced to each other within a non-threatening environment of ice-breaker games. One of the strategies was to provide the young people with a diary so that they could take responsibility for planning subsequent meetings with their mentors.

Although the linking process worked reasonably well, one of the mentors later suggested a different approach for consideration:

"I found the introduction process really quite difficult because everybody was trying to make new relationships at the same time. Perhaps we could have had a number of social outings as a group, so the relationship-building bit could take place over time but with other people around. Over time, there could be, say, three established 'pairs' with three prospective 'pairs' so that the new people could see how things might develop."

It is now almost twelve months since the pairs were introduced. Of the five matches, one pair chat weekly on the Internet while two others meet regularly. The other two matches were slower to develop due to illness of one of the parties but the people involved report their intention to persevere. The project evaluation suggests that the mentor relationships are highly valued by the young people.

It became apparent that continuing support for the mentors and evaluation of the various mentoring relationships was essential. The mentors decided to meet monthly to discuss the progress of their respective matches, disseminate information on issues or problems which arose, and to maintain contact with the programme staff.

Unlike *Big Brother - Big Sister* matches, there was no expectation of weekly meetings or outings together, and most of the contact has been through telephone conversations. None of the mentors reported being overly involved with their mentee's life but had assumed a more passive role of being available when required. The following description of the relationship was typical:

"I enjoyed the training days and learned a few interesting things. I agreed with my mentee that I would be available on the end of the phone if he needed me. He tends to ring me more than I ring him, but I guess we chat about once a fortnight. We don't go out together to movies or anything like that. But I think he just likes to know that I'm there in the background, and I'm quite comfortable with that."

All five of the mentors reported that they had gained something from the mentoring process. All of those interviewed understood that this was a pilot project with limited resources, and there were a number of suggestions about possible improvements.

These suggestions from the mentors included better preparation for the mentors, a longer and more integrated approach to establishing contact with the prospective match, regular support meetings and continuation training for mentors, and a possible time-limit on their commitment.

Some mentors suggested that the current ‘open-ended’ nature of the relationship (rather than, for example, a twelve-month commitment) might deter potential volunteers.

The young people (‘mentees’) also reported general satisfaction with the outcomes for them. One young man described his experience of the matching process and the project:

“It was pretty scary going to this BBQ knowing that the mentors would be there, and wondering who you were going to be paired up with. I was lucky ‘cause I hit it off with my match almost straight away. We’re both into computers and the Internet, so we keep in touch that way. It’s a bit like having a pen-friend in some ways — you can toss ideas around without having to say them directly to a person. I find that quite good — so, for me, this is good.”

One of the mentors summed up the general feelings of both the mentors and mentees that, even if the project did not achieve all of their expectations, the concept of peer mentors is intrinsically good and should be developed further. The young woman said:

“Don’t get me wrong, you people did a great job. For a first time, it was excellent, even if not all the couples got on real [sic] well. At least you tried, and that’s better than I had when ‘the Department’ [sic] gave me the flick and I was on my own at fifteen with no support — nothing. Anything has got to be better than that.”

We appreciate that this is a pilot programme, and that a longitudinal evaluation of the impact on the leaving care process would require a larger sample investigated over a more lengthy period. Assessing outcomes in the short term is problematic, and criteria for success of this pilot may therefore be limited to the continued involvement of the young people in the project or to an improvement in their self-confidence, self-sufficiency and self-management which they reported during the interviews. However, our initial findings support the young woman’s observation, and our contention that the project yields significant benefits for the young people involved.

Preliminary data from other key stakeholders indicates the potential for this pilot project to inform policy development in a number of aspects of the leaving care experience.

Conclusions

This project breaks new ground in the continuing search for better ways of managing the integration into adult society of young people who cannot be cared for by their parents. It is innovative in that it involves care graduates as volunteer peer mentors for young people preparing to leave State Care.

Notwithstanding the limitations of assessing long-term outcomes and the small size of this pilot study, we see this project having immediate benefits for the young people leaving care as it has the potential to significantly ameliorate some of the difficulties experienced during their transition to independent living.

Other benefits include the policy and practice implications for people involved in looking after children in State Care. The project complements existing research, is innovative in terms of Australian practice, and potentially will assist both State and Federal Government departments with aspects of caring for children who, for a variety of reasons, can neither live with their parents nor rely on parental support on being discharged from care.

This project may also lead to the development of new research-based strategies to assist the transition to independent living for care graduates. Two such strategies are the adoption of Standards for After Care Support and the provision of a Leaving Care Guide.

We are therefore currently seeking funding to extend the tandem projects reported in this paper, to formalise the selection and training of mentors, and to publish a Leaving Care Guide.

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