Project Assessment and Evaluation: The Aspire Program

Final Report
by
Emily Amanda Wessels

Host Organization: John Howard Society Peterborough

Faculty Supervisor: Hayley Goodchild, Trent University

Trent Community Research Centre Project Coordinator: Dave Tough

Trent Community Research Centre
www.trentcentre.ca

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis and evaluation of the Aspire program based out of the John Howard Society of Peterborough. This program aims at assisting youth ages 17-25 in achieving their personal career and training goals through mentor-based relationships. Methods of analysis include literature review and semi-structured interviews. A review of academic and grey literature on engaging young adults in positive development through mentoring relationships was completed. The semi-structured interview aspect of the research focused on identifying the aspects of successful mentoring relationships that have lasted more than three months and assessing the effectiveness of the Aspire program as it is currently practiced. Currently there are six mentoring matches at the John Howard Society which have exceeded three months in length. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with mentors and mentees involved in the program. The interviews focused on the participants' experiences in the program and were not life history type interviews. The data obtained was transcribed and analyzed using coding and grounded theory. The data collected suggests that that mentoring relationships can contribute to positive youth development. In particular, mentoring relationships that last a year or more tend to show increased signs of positive youth development. The report finds the prospects of the Aspire Program in its current position are positive, however implementation in some areas of the program could be improved. The areas of weakness require further investigation and action by the management of the program. However, these results are based on a small sample size so may not be generalizable to the program as a whole. The report also investigates the fact that the analysis conducted has limitations. Some of these limitations include; data limitations as a result of the small group of interviewees.

The researcher recommends that the John Howard society implements: the creation of a relaxed room for participants, peer-support combined with mentoring and the implementation of weekly/bi-weekly physical and other activities into the program. These recommendations would assist in making the program stronger.

Acknowledgments

This research report would not have been possible without the arrangements made between both the members of the John Howard Society and Trent University. The John Howard Society and the participants I had the opportunity to work with in the Aspire program were all very welcoming and friendly throughout the project. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to take this course and complete my research project with the John Howard Society. I have learned many practical and theoretical skills throughout the completion of this course that will be transferable for my future academic and career paths.

Introduction

The John Howard Society provides services for individuals that are involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. As part of that mandate, JHS Peterborough started the Aspire program nearly two years ago with the support of the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The Aspire Program works in conjunction with two outside organizations: The Trent Valley Literacy Association and Employment Planning and Counselling Services. All of the programs mentioned are all based in the city of Peterborough. Mentees can be classified as individuals from ages 17-25 that are looking for career and goal guidance. A mentor is an adult that is considered a career professional from the Peterborough community. The program is unique for the reason that it is the only mentoring program of its kind to exist thus far in the Peterborough area. The Aspire mentoring program provides young

adults with the opportunity to gain insight and knowledge while exploring their interests and skills in order to assist them with the procedure of choosing a career to pursue.

The proposed research project, carried out in conjunction with the Trent Community Research Centre and Trent University, contributes to the work of the Aspire program by evaluating the extent to which the program has achieved its desired outcomes over a one-year period. The proposed project also identified best practices in engaging young adults ages 17 to 25 in positive mentoring relationships, based on a combination of academic research and primary data collection, thus adding to the growing body of literature on mentoring programs. Another goal of the evaluation is to provide information in order to answer the question on whether or not the Aspire program should continue as is or if changes to the program should be made. Another goal of the evaluation is to provide possible strategies that could be used in the future to enhance the program. The key research questions and project goals that this research paper examines includes;

- what are the emerging best practices for engaging young adults in positive mentoring relationships?
- What are the key characteristics of mentoring relationships between mentors and mentees that exceed three months? Is the Aspire program contributing to positive youth development?
- What have been the experiences of some of the participants so far? And what recommendations, if any, does the researcher have?

The final section of this research paper is dedicated to potential recommendations and implementations for the Aspire Program based on the information gathered from the interviews and literature.

Research Methodology

Prior to conducting interviews, the student researcher completed literature review to assist in understanding the potential risks involved in interviewing vulnerable people. A few possible emotional risks exist for participants as a result of this research, specifically the young adults (17–25) facing barriers to employment. (Please note that for the purpose of this research only participants 18 or over were interviewed). Since the mentees have often experienced significant economic and/or social challenges in their lives, it's possible that some questions about their employment status and experience in the program would cause them discomfort, frustration and anxiety. It's important to understand that there are four key things that can influence whether a participant suffers harm during a research project. Some individuals can find participating in research stressful, especially individuals that are vulnerable. During interviews it is possible for hidden or suppressed memories to be uncovered. Additional concerns may come up and participants may worry about the information they have shared. *(NSPCC, Research with children, ethics, safety and avoiding trauma 02/12/2018).* Participants may experience emotional risks either during or after the interview process. In order to minimize the risk for emotional harm during the interview process, participants were only asked questions regarding the program and their experience in the program so far. Questions regarding participants life history were not asked by the student researcher.

Process of Analyzing Data

The first step in processing the data was to transcribe the interviews. Each interview was about fifteen to twenty minutes long, because I am a slow typer and this was my first time transcribing it took me on average about two hours to transcribe each interview. After transcribing, I immersed myself in the data. This involved replaying and listening to the interviews and reading the transcriptions and recording any questions or ideas I had. Once I completed transcribing, I highlighted any topics that stood out from each interview. These topics were brought together to then create themes.

In qualitative research there are three main types of interpretation which include creditability, audibility and authenticity. Themes are important when completing any qualitative research, these ideas assist in constructing the reliability and validity in the findings from the research. The first concept, credibility occurs when the individuals interviewed believes that the information they gave the researcher is accurately represented by the findings. This means that the information in the findings is free from bias and is actual information from the participant and their perspective (Bryman,2012). Audibility happens when the researcher doesn't let their biases control and influence their analysis. The outcome of this process is depended on the participants experiences in the program. This step is especially difficult in my case because due to ethical limitations I do not have the ability to use direct quotes in my analysis. The last concept in qualitative research is authenticity. Authenticity is defined as when the interviewers feel that the information regarding the experiences shared from their interview was not tampered with. Authenticity can be better described as when the researchers and the readers interpretation of the study is the same.

Two main methods were used in this study, including a literature review and semi-structured interviews. The research design that was used for this project was a case study approach that occurred through four qualitative semi-structured interviews (Bell, Bryman, Teevan, 2012). This design allowed the researcher to get a detailed description from the participants regarding their personal experience, feelings and recommendations of the Aspire program. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to expand on certain topics more than others, raise issues that the researcher had not considered but also allows for the natural flow of a conversation.

The two groups of participants that were interviewed were mentees and mentors, all of whom were over the age of eighteen, due to conditions placed on the project by the International Development Studies research ethics board that prevent student researchers from working with people under eighteen years old.

Two separate interview guides were developed in order to answer specific research questions created by the researcher and the host organization. The interviews were conducted in a private room in the Peterborough Public Library. The host sent out initial contact emails to all the participants notifying them of the study along with the contact email. The interviews typically lasted 15-20 minutes but tended to be longer with the mentors. All of the interviews were voice recorded on the researcher's laptop in order to be saved for the process of transcription. Six of Aspire members contacted the researcher about participating. Ultimately four interviews were conducted, two mentees and two mentors. The information gathered from all four interviews provided the student researcher with lots of information and insight on the experiences of the participants and recommendations if any for the program.

Literature Review

There have been many recent studies completed advocating that mentor relationships can provide individuals with the support and skills needed in order to be successful within their careers and lives in general. In order to understand and evaluate the Aspire program it was important to conduct a preliminary literature review regarding the role of mentorship, positive youth development and strong mentorship models. The articles I chose to review are based on similar themes that came up from the interviews I conducted.

The article *"The Role of Peer Relationships in Career Development"* discusses the importance of mentorship along with the alternative, which is peer support. In the initial process of the relationship, the development of goals is essential in the growth of the relationship (Kram, Isabella, 1985). The authors found that mentors provide young adults with experience, skills, knowledge and most importantly support. Mentorship is unique in the sense that both parties involved benefit. The mentor has the opportunity to give back to the community through the act of mentorship and the mentee gets the

opportunity to learn from an experienced professional. The program aimed to help young people that are from unemployment backgrounds or are looking into continuing their education. According to social psychologists, an individual's sense of self is developed from the formation of numerous personal relationships. Having a mentor in a young person's life provides them with one very positive and supportive relationship that will contribute to their personality (Kram, Isabella, 1985).

The authors explain that peer support is equally important for career development as traditional mentorship approaches. Relationships formed with individuals other than the mentor (e.g. peers), provides an alternative relationship that can be used towards self-development of the youth (Kram et al., 1985). It's important for youth to have relationships with both mentors and peers; this allows them to have numerous relationships which gives them extended support, especially if one of the relationships fail. This mentorship model combined with peer support makes sense because in most organizations the ratio of mentors to peers is usually small. Peer relationships are sometimes easier to handle for young adults because they can relate and communicate easily with their peers that have often been in similar situations. The research completed by these authors confirm that mentor relationships and peer relationships offer very similar assistance (Kram, Isabella, 1985). Peer relationships allow youth to explore their values, beliefs and experiences while giving them the opportunity to connect to one another. Peers also provide emotional support for each other. One of the main differences between mentor and peer relationships is the personal feedback they acquire from this relationship. Peer relationships are more friendships that often extend out of organizations into everyday life (Kram, Isabella, 1985). Another difference between peer and mentor relationships is the fact that peer mentoring offers a two-way exchange. Peer mentoring is useful throughout all stages. It's important to note that these relationships are shaped by the activities and situations that the participants go through together within the course of these relationships.

The article *"Best Practices in Academic Mentoring: A Model for Excellence"* provides an explanation of a mentorship model that was based off of a mentoring program used to educate nursing students to assist them in developing skills and experience needed for a career in their field. In this study mentors and mentees were matched based on their interests. The mentor and their mentee worked on a group project together while the mentee also worked on a group project with their peers. Students involved in this mentoring program reported increased confidence and professional development (Nick et al., 2012). The findings of this mentoring experiment revealed that six essential categories had to be met to create the best mentoring program for the nursing students. Although there are six categories, I will only be focusing on the ones that are applicable in relation to the Aspire program. The first category is appropriately matching the participants to mentors. Having mismatched participants can be detrimental to the outcome of the relationship and the development of the youth. One of the ways the participants can be matched is when the organization provides each mentee with two different possible mentor options. The mentee is given background information regarding the mentors back ground and gets to choose which mentor they would like to be paired with. Currently in the Aspire program, the mentees and mentors are matched by the program staff. The second important aspect is to establish clear purpose and goals for the mentorship to be based upon. This insures the direction of the relationship. It is important for both members to explain to each other their purpose in participating in the mentorship program. This allows for both parties to understand how the relationship will be mutually beneficial, creating commitment (Nick et al., 2012). The third criteria is creating a clear time commitment, whether the pair are meeting once every week or once a month. Along with commitment, the mentorship partners must participate in numerous activities to assist in the development of the relationship. A fourth condition of strong mentorships is the need for the mentor to assist their mentee in achieving a balanced life, teaching them how to work smarter (Nick et al., 2012). The fifth aspect is to create a supportive environment for the mentorship to flourish in. Finally, the last component required to form a successful mentorship is having administrative support and

commitment that aids in the progression of the mentorship. The themes mentioned within this article are essential features needed in order to assist, initiate, solidify, build and advocate mentoring relationships (Nick et al., 2012). In conclusion, if the themes discussed within this article are met within the mentorship the mentee will increase their overall professional and self-development.

Drawing on both theory and research, Rhodes article *"A Model for the Influence of Mentoring Relationships on Youth Development"* discovered that the outcomes of mentorship depends on the age, situation of the youth as well as the quality and time of the mentorship offers three different things to mentees. Companionship is another characteristic of mentorship that is formed through the enjoyment of different activities. According to the theory of attachment, when a young person is experiencing stress they look for comfort and guidance. The most successful mentor relationships are those that contain constant caregiving that results in the mentee feeling stable. Mentorship relations are positive because in some cases youth will listen to their mentor's advice as opposed to their parents. Another factor that affects the outcome of mentorship is previous attachments that the mentee has had with adults. If they have had good adult relationships in the past, they have an increased possibility of possessing a positive mentor relationship. The longer the mentorship, the greater chance of a positive relationship outcome. The last feature affecting the relationship is the strength of the emotional connection between mentees and mentors.

Mentoring is an essential tool for individuals that are looking to grow and reach their full potential. Many workplaces implement mentoring programs in hopes of seeing their employees excel. An alternative to mentorship programs in the workplace may be co-ops or internships (Dansky, 1996). This specific piece of literature discusses the two dimensions of mentorship, being psychological and instrumental. The psychosocial aspect helps the person form their identity. Instrumental function assists in

skill building. Compared to employees that are not mentored, mentored employees excel in all areas of their careers. Group mentoring in the workplace that occurs between colleagues also develops the individual's skills. Group mentoring is facilitated includes all members of the group and makes everyone feel included. However, similar to one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring goes through a process containing numerous stages. The formation of psychological groups happens when people that share the same purpose come together. Two psychological benefits that are a result of groups include increased confidence plus self-esteem, two characteristics needed to become successful (Dansky, 1996). Colleagues in the workplace that have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem believe in their abilities and go further. If an organization can get its employees to view it as a psychological group, the outcomes of mentoring will naturally occur. When employees participate in work events they create closer bonds to their colleagues because relationships become stronger. Ultimately the author argues that group mentoring may be better because it provides an increased level of support.

The articles discussed are all very different but focus on a similar topic and generate the same reoccurring themes. Many of these studies emphasize the benefit of giving mentees some choice in terms of the mentor. Another commonality seems to involve setting clear goals at the beginning of the relationship.

Interview findings

Mentors

All of the interviews for my research paper went very well and all of the participants provided very interesting information regarding their experiences within the aspire programs. After transcribing the interviews, there were a few commonalities noted between the two mentor interviews. The mentors discussed how they were impressed with the connections that the Aspire program had made with EPC and

other organizations and look forward to seeing the program make even more connections in the future.

One of the mentors shared a very interesting story about the positive experiences they had with their mentee and how they feel as though they had the opportunity to help them realize all of the skills they have to offer and a field of interest for a possible career. The mentor also helped their mentee learn how to live a balanced life with the addition of some daily physical activity. Both mentors discussed how they were happy to participate in the program and work with youth in hopes of making a positive impact in their lives. The mentors both had long term relationships with their mentees which indicates that the retention rate could be considered high. One thing mentioned by a mentor was the fact that being involved in the program gave them a different perspective on the young adults facing challenges to employment in their community. Mentors noted that the Aspire program does a great job at assisting youth but believes that due to their realization of the amount of youth that need help, it would be beneficial if mentees could get through the program quicker allowing for an overall increase of youth being assisted.

Mentees

One of the mentees discussed how they appreciated how the John Howard Society provides bus passes for the mentees in order to use them to meet their mentors, this made the mentee feel very comfortable. The mentees interviewed also expressed how they enjoyed the mentorship program, but they wish that they could have more frequent in person meetings with their mentors. Both of the mentees that were interviewed discussed their goals and ideas they had for their future. However, the mentees seemed as though they did not have specific goals set along with a plan on how to do so with their mentors. One of the mentees mentioned a big event that occurred in the past at the John Howard Society and how they would like to see more public events happen in the future, if possible along with more physical activities enjoyed regularly with their peers. Throughout the interviews the idea of a casual space or room was discussed, one mentee had the idea of a room being created with comfortable furniture, board games and possibly animals. This individual also expressed the desire to meet with their peers in the program up to

once a week in this casual space to talk and spend time with their peers, like a support group. One of the mentees discussed the fact that they have a very stressful life and how the presence of their mentor helps them stay stable and calm. It was also mentioned how in the past there have been classes offered at the John Howard for different things including photography. Mentees enjoyed the idea of fun classes and would like to see more classes available if possible. Throughout the conversation with the mentees discussed the possibility of incorporating healthy or foods or different foods from various cultures at the monthly pizza nights. The mentee discussing the possibilities also noted that although they had these new ideas for food options for the aspire program, the budget of the program is always taken into consideration and the mentee mentioned how somethings may not be feasible because of the budget. All members enjoy the regular pizza nights and looked forward to attending them. The participants interviewed all noted the positive feelings they have towards the Aspire program and all seemed to be optimistic regarding their futures in the program even if things may have started off at a slow pace for some.

Positive Features of the Aspire Program

The following information is a list of the reoccurring positive themes of the aspire program from the participants interviewed.

- Excellent connections with other organizations and members of the community

- Gives the mentees the opportunity to realize their skills and career opportunities through mentorship

- Involvement in the Aspire program can assist mentees in discovering potential careers.

- High participant retention rate.

Limitations of the Aspire Program

-Some of the mentees would like to be able to meet in person with their mentors more often.

- Lack of group meetings for the participants, some individuals voiced how they would like to meet with the Aspire group and mentor on a more regular basis, as oppose to monthly.

- Lack of different activities, games for the members of the Program to participate in.

Recommendations for the Future of the Aspire Program

Based on the information gathered from the literature review combined with the information from the interviews, there are a few positive limitations identified. These themes can be translated into recommendations that could be used to increase the future development of the Aspire program. These recommendations could enhance the program if it's possible for the organization to implement them, based on preference and also the budget of the program. I also recommend that if possible maybe the John Howard society could have an employee from Trent or Fleming career centre teach a class regarding different programs available at these schools.

1.Participants would like to meet with their mentors at least once or twice a month. As well as have an increase in group meetings including their peers and mentors.

2. As mentioned by participants, the John Howard Society is a rather large building. If possible members of the program would like to see a casual space created where they can have fun, relax and converse with the other members.

3. Another theme was the interest in more activities for the mentees of the program to participate in together, both physical outdoor activities and indoor activities.

4. Participants enjoy the one to one mentoring with their mentor, however would like to have closer relationships with their peers. If possible the implementation of weekly meetings/ activities for peers to participate in with the combination of monthly or bi-weekly private meetings with their mentor would yield the best results.

5. Recommendations for Best Mentoring Practice:

- Establish a clear goal and purpose in the initial development of the mentorship pair which is periodically monitored by the staff of the organization.

- Increasing the amount of group aspire meetings

- Both participants in the mentorship must participate in various activities in order to develop the relationship.

- Mentors should teach their mentees ways in which they can live a balanced life

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Findings and Research Limits

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Initially the researcher had planned on conducting six to ten interviews if possible, there were a few challenges that came up during the time span of the research. Only a few participants contacted the researcher and out of that group only four individuals decided to complete interviews. Some participants were unable to make it to the scheduled interviews and others once initial contact was made decided not to follow through with the interview process. Even though the goal number of interviews was not met, the information that was gathered from all four interviews was all very beneficial to the evaluation of the Aspire Program.

Conclusions

This report is the final deliverable in a four-month long evaluation of the John Howard Societies Aspire Program, which involved semi-structured interviews and a literature review. This research experience and the information provided with from the interviews I was able to analyze the Aspire program as it stands and recognize the positive features it contains as well as possible limitations followed by a discussion of recommendations. The Aspire program is unique in the area of Peterborough and it is an essential tool needed for youth and members of the community. Although this program contains few limitations, the evaluation confirms that Aspire is contributing to positive youth development within the community and could be enhanced with the recommendations from this research study.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Interview Guide- Aspire Program
Notes
- Introduce myself
- Read over the informed consent form
- Go over each section
- Get them to sign it
- I am going to record it, say risks, explain rights
- If you want to pass or stop the interview let me know (delete transcription)
- Ask about gift cards
- Turn on the recording device
- Ask if the participant has any questions

Mentees
1. How did you discover the Aspire Program?
2. How long have you been in the program?
3. Tell me about your first meeting with your mentor.
5. Describe your experience so far in the aspire program. How often do you meet with/contact your mentor?
5. Describe your experience so far in the aspire program.
6. What sorts of skills and/or knowledge has your mentor shared with you?
7. How do you feel that the aspire program is assisting with your career and training goals?
9. What do you feel is being done right in the program?
10. What changes would you make to the program? Recommendations? Activities?

Mentors
1. How did you find out about the program?
2. How long have you been involved with the program?
3. Can you tell me about yourself (interests, career).
4. What would you say are the benefits of this program to you and your mentee? What about contributions to society? Why or why not?
5.Is there a regular line of communication between mentee and mentors?
6. The project's main objectives are to support youth aged 17-25, in achieving training & employment success through a variety of interactions with a caring adult from our community. Do you feel that the program meets the objectives it states?
7. How would you define positive youth development?
8. What do you feel is being done right with the program?
9. Do you feel as if there are any problems with the Aspire program? If so what changes would you make to the program? Recommendations?

Follow Ups:
- Interesting can you tell me more about that?
- Can you expand on that?

- Can you give me an example?
- That's great do you mind if we can get to the next question?
- This room is booked I'm really sorry this has been great to hear these stories,
- Its great it sounds like you have close relationship with the mentee, but I don't think it's appropriate that you tell me all this
- I'm sorry to hear that, I'm sorry that happened to you, the sense of this interview is to see how the program is working.
- Do you want to take a break for a few minutes?

Appendix B: Visual Model of Best Mentoring Practices

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                        Excellence in
                          mentoring

              Responsibilities and outcomes

   Orientation   Socialization   Development   Facilitation
     to the        to the        of teaching,   of the
     faculty       academic       research,     growth of
      role         community      and service    future
                                    skills      leaders in
                                                nursing and
                                                  nursing
                                                 education
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Best practices for mentoring programs					
Achieve appropriately matched dyads by	Establish clear mentorship purpose & goals by	Solidify the dyad relationship by	Advocate for and guide the protégé by	Integrate the protégé into the academic culture by	Mobilize institutional resources by
• Using pairing scenarios • Seeking dyad input during the matching process	• Expressing reciprocity • Specifying time commitment • Planning activities spread over time	• Creating collegiality • Establishing regular communication • Exchanging frequent feedback from mentor and protgégé • Building a supportive environment	• Providing psychosocial support • Achieving life balance • Advising career progression	• Teaching networking skills • Facilitating socialization	• Gaining administrative support • Including mentoring expectations in promotion and workload documents • Offering mentor training programs • Providing release time