

METHODS BRIEFING 3

Evidence-based policy, Theory-based synthesis, Practice-based reviews

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The Programme aims to develop qualitative and quantitative methods within the context of substantive research. It also aims to encourage effective dissemination of good practice.

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The project aimed to broaden the strategies and remit of systematic review ('the instrument of choice for evidence-based policy'). The aims of the project were to:

- *Widen the types of primary studies included in a review*
- *Deepen the explanatory role of research synthesis*
- *Extend the policy-maker input and the policy questions addressed*

These aims were pursued through a three-part project:

- *To codify fully a new approach to systematic review (realist synthesis)*
- *To conduct a new review on 'mentoring' under the auspices of this method*
- *To engage with policy stakeholders on the form and content of the review*

Realist synthesis

All methods of systematic review involve as assembly line whereby the key question is set, primary studies are hunted down, their quality is appraised, the core content is extracted, an analysis is performed on the assembled data, and the findings are disseminated in the form of policy recommendations. Realist synthesis asks how interventions work rather than if they work. It commences with theory construction and the basic motif of theory testing and refinement then runs through all these standard stages, changing every one as a consequence. This approach has several advantages over conventional reviews, such as the ability to utilise a particularly wide range of primary inquiries and generating policy advice on the implementation and targeting of programmes.

- Key Publication: R Pawson et al (2004) 'Realist Synthesis: An Introduction' RMP2 55pp <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications/>

Mentoring relations

The review created and tested several theories of how mentoring partnerships operate to best effect. The model for youth mentoring shows how it progresses from 'befriending' to 'direction-setting' to 'coaching' and then 'advocacy'. ups with family, and brushes with the law. Disadvantaged young people have frequent

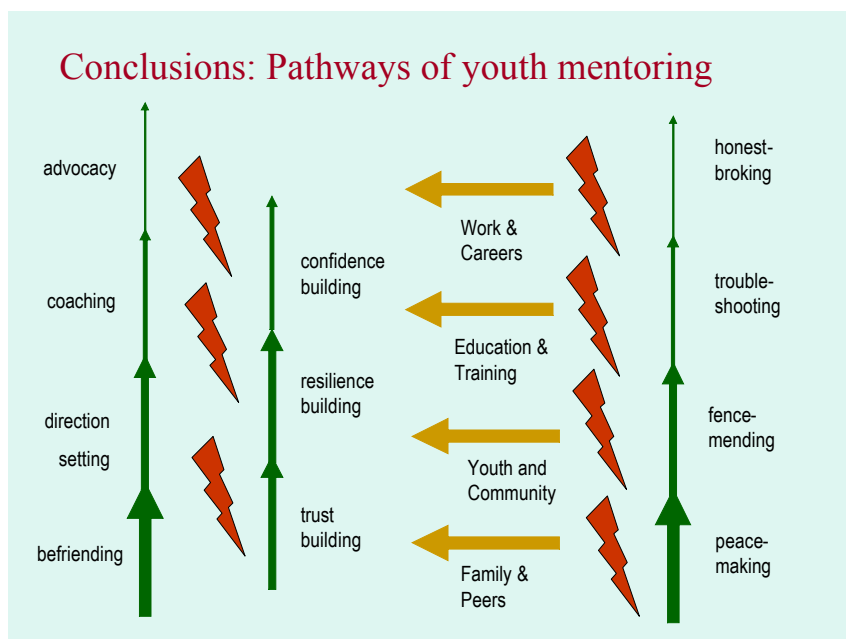
baattles with authorities, bust-ups with family, and brushes with the law. In such circumstances mentoring relationships often collapse and the model also includes a perpetual 'firefighting' element. Mentoring partnerships work better and, to some extent, through the development of linkages with the family and friends of the mentee and, after that, with all manner of welfare and training agencies. Close relationships, even ones voluntarily and graciously proffered, cannot sweep away the institutional and structural forces that hold sway over young people's lives.

- Key Publication: R Pawson (2004) 'Mentoring Relationships: An Explanatory Review' ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice WP no21 94pp www.evidencenetwork.org

Shaping and utilising reviews

The research utilisation literature stresses the importance of shared ownership between review producers and users, agreement on the scope of the review, keeping users au fait with progress, and an emphasis on the clear presentation and relentless promotion of findings. We were interested in discovering how the production of a realist review impacted on these key stages. Three particular compatibilities were noted. Policy makers operate developmentally; they build models; and think more in terms of services than interventions. The key realist synthesis motif of theory-testing and refinement suits these purposes rather better than the conventional 'verdict passing' mode of systematic review. We experimented with alternative styles of dissemination, two examples of which are the 'snakes and ladders' model and the 'evidence based pep-talk' for new mentees (overleaf).

- Key publication: A Boaz and R Pawson (Jan 2005, forthcoming) 'The Arduous Road from Evidence to Policy: Five Journeys Compared' *Journal of Social Policy*



Evidence based policy: from verdicts to models

An evidence-based ‘pep-talk’

Welcome to your toughest ever challenge. What we’ll attempt to do in this session is to teach you to play ‘snakes and ladders’, to help you anticipate the ups and downs of our mentoring scheme. Don’t expect too many of your charges to make it to the winning square, but please appreciate that surviving at least some of the steps on the way will still be worthwhile.

Expect your relationship to uncoil very slowly. Try to begin with the basic elements of befriending – be a good companion. Start unambitiously by establishing and building upon mutual interests before moving on to the consideration of alternative futures and the means of striving towards them. Build these further plans with caution because we do need to affirm that, as sure as eggs are eggs, your mentee will not stick to the script: s/he will let you down and the partnership will tend to crack. For you both to continue in the programme, you should anticipate having to build and rebuild trust continually. The problems that got your mentees into their present predicaments are still likely to be present, and so your next main aim is that of building up resilience in the face of life’s continual knocks.

To get to some sort of equilibrium at this stage will be achievement indeed, but you will find that any further progress

is impossible unless other agents and agencies are drawn into the orbit of your partnership. You may have accepted this challenge because of your ability to get on with young people. Success at a one-to-one level ultimately depends, however, on the many-to-many. So called ‘engagement mentoring’ is just that, and depends on your ability to know and show the ropes through family and peer ties, into channels of community support and on to education, training and career opportunities.

Don’t worry. We appreciate that, at some point in this sequence, your capacity to help and direct your mentee through the appropriate networks will become exhausted. At this point, especially, you should call on the assistance of the programme co-ordinator who will make use of our formal liaisons with allied youth and career schemes. *[Here, our pep-talk takes for granted another lesson learned in the review, namely that the new voluntarism needs to be firmly anchored in old-style service provision.]*

Don’t imagine, however, that you hand over responsibility at this point. Volatility does not disappear overnight. You should expect a further round of trust-building, and a further role in fence-mending as your mentee’s spleen is vented, and sometimes justifiably so, against this new set of authority figures.

Further details are available from:
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 Further papers downloadable from:
www.ccsr.ac.uk/method/ and www.evidencenetwork.org
 For the grand summary, see Ray Pawson *Evidence Based Policy: A Realist Perspective* Sage
 (forthcoming)