

Mentoring India's Youth

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Abstract

India has seen substantial improvement in access to education nationwide, but there are concerns about the quality of education and consequently, the employability of school and college graduates. Large numbers of India's youth also face the problem of inequality of opportunity. Families and communities that do not have 'cultural capital' (years of schooling, access to resources and information networks) find it a challenge to nurture talent in their children. In this article we discuss one intervention—mentoring—that has the potential to address these two challenges simultaneously. This article reports on an experimental year-long mentoring programme for 20 destitute girls, living in a government institution in south India. Participant experience shows that there is little knowledge of the formal mentoring function in India, and a sense of fear associated with adult–youth relationships. In the mentoring programme, these notions were dispelled as the relationships developed. Mentees recorded a change of attitude in learning English. The life skill exercises helped mentees plan for their future, and in some cases thwart early-marriage pressures. Mentoring functions like providing emotional regulation and collaborative skill-building were demonstrated in mentors helping mentees overcome fear in public speaking, examinations, speech defects, etc. Mentees recorded a change in their identity—they saw themselves as more capable. The relationship offered avenues for authentic companionship and several mentees saw their mentors as role models. These results show potential for formal youth mentoring programmes to have considerable positive impact on India's youth and enable them to become capable, confident and empowered.

Keywords

India, education, mentoring, youth development

Introduction

India is potentially on the verge of a historic 'demographic dividend'. In 2020, in a projected population of 1.3 billion, the average age in India will be only 29 years old, compared with the average age of 37 years in China and the USA, 45 in Western Europe and 48 in Japan (Chandrashekar, Ghosh, & Roychowdhury, 2006). This youthful population is expected to fuel India's rapid economic growth and also take advantage of globalization, outsourcing and technology to provide services to economies elsewhere with more ageing populations. However, before this dividend can be encashed, India's youthful population needs to have the skills and capabilities to be productive. Thus, India's youth must have access to education which is of good enough quality to enable them to be productive and creative members of the workforce. India has seen substantial improvement in

access to education nationwide, as measured by student enrolment in schools and colleges (Thomas, 2012). However, there are concerns about the quality of education, partly because of limited school infrastructure and also inadequacy of and absenteeism among teachers (De A., Khera, Samson, & Shiva Kumar, 2011). Consequently, the employability of school and college graduates and their preparedness for the workforce is often inadequate.

Large numbers of India's youth also face the problem of inequality of opportunity. This may arise because of factors such as family background, gender, caste, religion and place of residence. One study estimated that differences in family background alone can account for up to 17 per cent of inequality in wages, a lower bound for the overall inequality in opportunity (Singh, 2010). Family background and parental networks determine the quality of education that children can access and also affect what kind of role

models and aspirations children grow up with. Families and communities that do not have ‘cultural capital’ (years of schooling, access to resources and information networks) find it a challenge to nurture talent in their children. The lack of such networks of support significantly affects the ability of sections of India’s youth to achieve their potential and realize their ambitions.

Given these challenges, it would be useful to explore whether there are any interventions that can enhance capacity and also address inequality of opportunity. In this article we discuss one such intervention—mentoring—that has the potential to address these two challenges simultaneously. Mentoring also has the potential to be adopted and adapted in a decentralized manner, thus allowing for the possibility of scaling across the country. As the economic context within India changes, intergenerational relationships, such as, those facilitated by mentoring programmes, have tremendous potential to transform the capacity of Indian youth (Pryce, Niederkorn, Goins, & Reiland, 2010). India historically has had tight-knit communities and families where intergenerational relationships flourished and some sort of mentoring occurred within them. Demographic and social changes over the past several decades now make it necessary to supplement naturally occurring relationships with programmatic ones which can help older and younger groups ‘share in the richness (and challenges) of each others’ lives’ (Kaplan & Chadha, 2004).

In the following section of this article, we discuss briefly the history of mentorship and also the operational models and outcomes from mentoring programmes that have reached scale internationally. In the third section, we narrate experiences from a pilot mentoring programme in south India for destitute girls that the authors were involved in setting up and managing. We discuss the programme’s design, situational analysis of the participating institution and beneficiaries, and qualitative analysis of the participant experiences at the end of the first year of the programme. We conclude with a discussion on the potential of mentoring to transform the capabilities of India’s youth.

Mentoring—History, Process and Effectiveness

The mentoring tradition dates back three millennia to a story from Greek mythology. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ulysses has to go away to fight the Trojan War and needs to leave his young son, Telemachus, in the counsel and guidance of someone. He entrusts that responsibility to his wise friend

Mentor. For the 10 years Ulysses is away, Mentor proves to be a steadfast and enduring presence in Telemachus’ life. Since then, in ancient Greek, the word came to represent an individual with those qualities. Over time, the mentoring relationship has come to be defined in innumerable ways—as apprentice and master, student and teacher, and friend and counselor (Arevalo, 2004).

Mentoring comes within the emerging paradigm of Positive Youth Development (PYD). The emphasis in PYD is on letting youth be constructive agents of their own growth, with adults motivating the discovery of potential instead of teaching or schooling young people (Larson, 2006). Mentoring has had a long-standing intuitive appeal, because of the power of positive relationships with non-parental adults on positive developmental outcomes for young people. Not only do stories of the impact of natural mentoring relationships abound, but research shows that youth who identify the presence of natural mentors in their lives report better psychosocial outcomes, like lesser stress, fewer depression symptoms and greater satisfaction with life (Munson & McMillen, 2009).

The United States of America has by far witnessed the largest proliferation of youth mentoring programmes over the decades. There are over 4,500 agencies and programmes that provide youth mentoring services (Rhodes J., 2002). Mentoring initiatives in the United States started at the grassroots and have now grown to include a large array of non-profits, corporations and state bodies working hand in hand. In 2003, mentoring programmes received over 450 million dollars from the United States government for the expansion of their services.

Mentoring and Capabilities

Rhodes (2002, 2005) proposed the first formal modelling of the processes through which a mentor can have an impact on developmental outcomes in mentees. The authors propose that mentoring impacts occur through three inter-related processes: (a) improving the emotional and social well-being of youth; (b) improving their cognitive skills through instruction and intellectual challenge; and (c) role-modelling and identity formation. The extent of a mentor’s impact on these three factors depends largely on the quality and longevity of the mentoring relationship.

Emotional and Social Well-being

Mentors can offer youth experiences that provide them respite from the daily stress and hardships of their lives. Mentors can also provide youth with positive emotional

experiences that can help youth challenge negative views that they may hold of themselves and of their relationships with others. In this way, the mentoring relationship becomes a 'corrective experience' that can generalize to improve the youths' other relationships (Olds, Kitzman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997). Mentors have also been found to assist youth with both positive and negative emotional regulation, by acting as a sounding board and providing perspectives, advice and suggestions that might have been rejected if they had been offered by a parent (Keller, 2005).

Cognitive Development

Mentors can aid the cognitive development in mentees through several ways: introduction to new opportunities for learning, provision of intellectual challenge and guidance and the promotion of academic success. Mentors often come from backgrounds that are more privileged than mentees. Their social capital helps them offer experiences to mentees that expand their horizons, for example, work internships, cultural activities like visits to museums, theatre, etc. Mentors can also both directly and indirectly influence mentees' academic success. In school-based mentoring programmes, mentors work with mentees on school homework and projects. Mentors can also promote more positive attitudes to school, learning and academic success.

Identity Development

Mentors serve as role models and advocates that help shift the youths' conceptions about their current and future selves. This helps positive identity development in youth. Youth form ideas about their future selves by comparing the adults they know; this informs decision-making and behaviour. Most youth from disadvantaged backgrounds have limited contact with role models outside their immediate community. They believe their opportunities for success are limited (Blechman, 1992). Youth often form unrealistic expectations of future occupations and jobs, unaware of the education or skills required to enter them. Mentors are able to serve as a 'looking glass', offering youth a social mirror to form opinions of themselves.

The pathways for the impact of a mentor complement the capability framework for human development (Sen, 1999). Human well-being is theorized as the freedom and real capability to pursue what individuals desire. Education by itself is a necessary but insufficient input for individuals to take charge of their life choices (Dutt, 2012). In working with marginalized adolescent girls in India, Dutt (2012) finds that education provides a framework of opportunities, but remains insufficient to support the achievement of all round well-being or effective freedom. Capabilities

identified as essential in literature includes: awareness of self, decision-making, accessing information and knowledge resources, creating social and economic space and claiming political rights. Mentoring relationships hold enormous capacity to develop all such capabilities, as described by the formal modelling.

Effectiveness of Mentoring in the United States

Grossman and Tierney's (1998) United States-wide evaluation of the Big Brother and Big Sister (BBBS) programme was a landmark in proving the impact of mentoring programmes. The study surveyed youth who had been referred to BBBS programmes as needing mentoring services. One group of youth was randomly put into a waitlist for the services and another group was enlisted into the programme. The authors collected data both at the start of the programme and 18 months later. They found that compared to the control group of youth who had been waitlisted, youth who had mentors were less prone to skip classes, take drugs or drop out of school.

More reserved reports on the impact of mentoring programmes come from DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper (2002). They conducted a meta-analytical review of the impact of 55 mentoring programmes. They found that the positive effects of mentoring held true in a diverse range of programmes and also that the benefits of mentoring appeared to last for more than a year beyond the mentee's participation in the programme. However, the effect on the average mentee participating in the programme was modest. The average effect across sample sizes was small, 0.14, which was less than the effect sizes of some other prevention programmes focused on children and adolescents. The report also found that some critical factors were essential for particular effects on youth outcomes: relationship closeness, longevity, clear expectations, volunteer training and ongoing support and focus on instrumental activities. The meta-analytic review showed that while mentoring does work, certain programme features and relationship quality may be crucial before it can lead to substantially better outcomes for youth.

Processes and Outcomes from a Pilot Mentoring Programme in South India for Destitute Girls

The authors of this article were involved in setting up a pilot mentoring programme for a group of 20 adolescent

girls in the age group of 14–18 years residing in a Government Home for Girls (henceforth Home) run by the State Department for Women and Child Development in the southern Indian city of Mysore. The Home is governed by the Juvenile Justice Act of India, 2000, and takes in vulnerable girls in need of care and protection. Some of the groups that comprise vulnerable children are: (a) street children; (b) orphaned, abandoned and destitute children; (c) working children; (d) abused children; (e) children who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking; (f) children engaging in substance abuse; (g) children in conflict and disaster situations; (h) children in families at-risk; (i) differently-abled children; (j) mentally ill children; (k) HIV/AIDS-affected/infected children; and (l) juveniles in conflict with law (Mehta, 2008).

The Home takes in girls from the ages of 6 to 18 years. The girls are admitted into the Home only after an extensive enquiry, which is held by a Child Welfare Committee (CWC) to determine whether the child has no other option but to be placed into care. The CWC is constituted by the state government and functions as a bench of magistrates with powers equivalent to a metropolitan Magistrate or Judicial Magistrate of the first class. The Department of Women and Child Development see the institutionalization of girls as a last resort. If at all possible they will try to keep child and family together. Long-term institutionalization of a child can lead to emotional deprivation, maternal deprivation, low self-esteem, failure to trust, developmental delays, excessive routine and regimentation, segregation and isolation from society, difficulty in mainstreaming and adjusting in society, interpersonal relationship problems, anonymity and lack of personal attention (Mehta, 2008). When the girls turn 18, if it is appropriate and possible to rehabilitate them with family, they go back home. Girls who cannot be rehabilitated with families are transferred to the State Home for Women.

Prior to launching our mentoring initiative, a basic situational analysis was carried out in the Home through conversations with the girls in groups along with observations of their body language and demeanour during these conversations, and also by conducting interviews with key stakeholders like the Superintendent of the Home. The girls appeared confused about their future choices with most of them stating that their most pressing need from mentoring was help on a future academic/career choice. The girls had low self-efficacy beliefs and frequently expressed a sense of hopelessness about their futures. They wanted help from their future mentors on 'how to live' and 'how to solve problems'. They also had weak English

language skills. Most of the girls stated learning English as one of their main aims from the mentoring. The Superintendent of the Home also echoed this sentiment. She said that the girls lacked confidence to interact with people because of their poor English abilities. The girls were also largely unaware of the challenges and pressures that adolescents faced day-to-day, which made them particularly vulnerable upon leaving the Home to a number of issues, including sexual pressure and early marriage.

The general profile of the girls in the Home matched the psychosocial profile of Indian youth from low socio-economic strata. Adolescents from low socio-economic backgrounds in India have low self-esteem, lower internal control orientation, short-term orientation to the future (where their beliefs place lower emphasis on making long-term plans such as preparing for a career), low and stagnant levels of aspiration, and a lack of self-direction characterized by lower levels of task persistence, higher tendency to give up and higher expressions of hopelessness (studies cited in Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani, 2000). According to Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani (2000), 'the poor do not seem to be equipped with qualities, dispositions, skills, motivations and values linked to upward mobility (and breaking free of the cycle of poverty) when compared with the more privileged'.

Mentoring Programme: Objective and Design

One of the earliest theories on the impact of mentors deals with the upward mobility mentoring networks can provide. Granovetter (1973) posits in 'Social Network Theory' that resource mobilization, upward mobility and social adaptation are correlated with social networks that are large and diverse as opposed to small and intimate. For disadvantaged youth, non-kin mentors can serve as 'bridging ties', offering information and social contacts in areas like education and employment, which cannot be found in the existing social networks mentees possess, facilitating resource mobilization and upward mobility (Zippay, 1995). Since the girls have been separated from their families and communities and live in a closed-off environment, it was hypothesized that a mentoring programme which introduced them to a diverse group of female volunteer mentors and provided opportunities through structured activities for developing life skills, language skills and career plans could lead to empowered futures.

The mentoring programme was designed to be one year long. After consultations with the Home Superintendent

and staff it was decided that the girls in most immediate need of the mentoring intervention were the students preparing for the high-school exams and those in pre-university college. There were 20 such girls. A needs assessment was conducted through personal interviews with each mentee. Three areas that emerged as topics of common need were used to develop a structured mentoring curriculum on English, Life skills and Career planning. It was also decided to have only female mentors participate in the programme as several of the life skills and health topics touched upon issues sensitive for young girls and women, and it was felt that the girls may have apprehensions speaking about these with male volunteers.

To recruit volunteer mentors, information about the programme was circulated amongst local companies and academic institutions. Mentors were put through phone and in-person interviews. Ten mentors were recruited for the programme. Six of them were recruited through corporate social responsibility channels in their companies, four of them heard of the programme through word of mouth through their friend networks. The mentors were in the age group of 22–47 years. Seven out of the 10 mentors were employed at the time of the programme. Three of the mentors had had professional careers but were currently housewives. Mentors had to sign a 'Memorandum of Understanding' with the mentoring organization, pledging their participation in the entire programme, affirming to the rules and regulations and committing to the minimum number of mentoring meetings required. In pairing two girls with one mentor, reference was made to new models of mentoring in collectivist cultures like India, that encourage group involvement in the mentoring relationship (Liabo, Lucas, & Robert, 2005).

Mentors and mentees were inducted into the programme through a special workshop called 'Spritivity' created by the London Media Lab, London School of Economics, UK. The workshop is designed to 'encourage rich communication between groups of participants working together to explain, share, and explore in rich audiovisual language, the real and the potential worlds they inhabit'.¹ It was considered a relevant methodology for the mentoring programme. Further training to mentors was provided through an orientation and training programme. The mentoring began in August 2010 and formally concluded on September 2011. The programme was carried out through three mediums: face-to-face sessions conducted bi-monthly, online communication and workshops. There were several challenges in procuring and deploying technology for online mentoring at the Home; hence online

mentoring was done only sporadically for a handful of students.

Mentee Observations and Reports on the Programme

In August 2011, a series of focus groups were conducted with the girls participating in the programme to examine the girls' understanding of their experiences in the mentoring programme. Some of the key themes that were discussed were:

1. Mentees' sentiments and feelings on starting the programme, their expectations from the programme and how they felt the programme had benefitted them
2. Mentor–mentee relationship quality—their thoughts when they were first allotted a mentor, the relationship with their mentor, the role the mentors played in their lives
3. Mentees' views about the future—their future outlook, possible changes in their outlook over the course of the year and any unmet learning needs

The focus groups had 5–6 members each.² An external facilitator, who had not been a part of the programme, led the focus group. Each focus group ran for 60–90 minutes and was audio and videotaped. At the start of the focus group, the facilitator established the group protocols, stating that participation was voluntary and that information collected would be kept confidential. Each focus group was semi-structured, with some structured, open-ended questions as well as free discussion. The focus group was conducted in the local language, Kannada, in which the girls were most comfortable. The focus group was transcribed in English, with the end translation including connotations and contextual meanings (Esposito, 2001).

Analysis

Starting the programme: Several of the girls expressed that they had a sense of fear at the start of the programme, because they did not know with whom they would be interacting. One participant said, 'I had a lot of curiosity—what were they going to do. Also, sometimes I had some fear—how many people were going to come? What were we going to do in this programme?'

Girls expressed feeling a sense of hope about the programme and what purpose it could serve in their life: 'I felt that the programme would help me solve my problems. We all have problems, and we need to find solutions to such

problems. Through this programme, we would get the help of an elder person (mentor), so that we can find solutions to our problems. So I really liked the programme because we would be able to get such help.'

The programme was also perceived as being novel, because of the word 'mentor'. The girls had not heard the word before. Says one mentee: 'I didn't know itself what mentor meant. One time I had checked in a dictionary that it meant "margadarshak",³ but then I didn't know further what we would do in this.'

Another mentee said:

[...] we each got a card which said 'mentor'; we didn't understand what it meant at that time. We all thought it was 'mental' or something else. We didn't know what it meant. Then the next time they came, they explained to us that we would all get a mentor. This mentor would be our guide who will help us form goals for our life, they would tell us many things and would help us in achieving those goals. Then I understood about the programme. Until that point I didn't know.

The newness of the programme in their lives was also evident in the fact that the girls did not really know what to expect from the programme. Says a mentee:

I didn't have any real expectation. Once we started the sessions with my mentors—at that time I started realizing I had to set a goal for myself. Before that I was very carefree and non-serious. I didn't think too much about my goals. But my mentor started telling me that without such goals I would face a lot of difficulties in life, so I became serious.

Perceived benefits of participating in the programme:

- **English:** Several girls expressed the view that their ability to speak English improved. They spoke not only of real improvements but also attitudinal improvements in wanting to learn English. One mentee recounted that earlier she used to dislike speaking in English and would run or hide whenever there was any occasion she would have to speak in English. But she noted that now she was more open and participative in talking in English. Another said, 'Initially I didn't think I would fit in because they spoke in English. One of the persons who came explained to us that we must not fear English because it is very easy. And she helped us write a lot.'
- **Goal-setting:** One repeated sentiment was that the programme had helped the girls plan for their future. One mentee said this: 'The programme has been of a lot of use for me. Each child/person has a goal. If you ask a child, what do want to become, they'll say I want to become a doctor, engineer. Similarly, all of

us had goals in the Home—we wanted to help others, do something. But we didn't know anything about how we could achieve those goals. Our mentors were all very good people. They helped us understand how to study well, how we can prepare for our goals, what exams to give. They spoke to us from their experience—becoming adults and achieving their goals, the problems they went through to achieve their goals.' This mentee was also able to substantiate and provide an example of when her mentor was able to provide advice on a particular problem she had brought up—financing her future education.

Another mentee illustrated how goal-setting helped her tackle the issue of early marriage. She said that the Home pressurizes them to get married early and does not help them form any plans to study further or work. She said in such situations, with no other options, they often feel helpless and have to marry whoever the Home chooses. She said that because of her mentor she was able to stick onto her goal of becoming a fashion designer and was able to refuse marriage.

- **Overcoming fears:** Mentors were critical in two instances in helping their mentees overcome fears that were holding them back in their academic and social interactions. One mentee recounted how her mentor had helped her deal with her fear of exams. She said, 'Before the programme started I used to have very bad exam fear. I would write everything properly but would still be very frightened about the results. I used to fear making mistakes and being scolded. In the middle of the programme, there was an exam and when I discussed it with my mentor, she told me that the more scared I get, the more I will forget and do worse. By getting scared I won't achieve anything. If I want to achieve anything, I will have to forget about fear. I completed my 10th standard exam this year. I feel my fear has become lesser.'

Mentors were able to provide mentees simple advice, which nevertheless meant a lot to the mentees because of the position the mentors held in their life and the credibility and authority that came with their life and work experiences.

In another mentoring relationship, the mentor was able to help the mentee cope with a stammer that held her back from freely engaging in class and outside. The mentor first dispelled the notion the mentee had been holding that the stammer made her abnormal. She helped the mentee with some speaking exercises and encouraged her to express herself. In the focus group, the mentee said, 'She told me

that this problem people can have in a very severe or medium degree. She told me that mine is in a medium degree. Then she also told me there's no medicine for this. I can only cure it by speaking. She gave me a sheet to practice speaking and record when I was stammering. Earlier, I never went anywhere I had to speak, because I was always worried what people will say about my stammer. From a young age, whenever I had doubts for anything in class, I would ask my friends. That was until 9th standard, but in 10th standard, I became very confident. I would go and ask the teacher every doubt of mine. I speak very freely now. Now I feel very happy because I can speak really well.'

- **Identity development:** Mentees saw themselves as more capable individuals after the programme. One mentee said: 'From a young age whenever we saw the English news on the TV or saw people use computers, we would think this is so difficult, we will never be able to do it. After this programme, we have realized that all of us can do it.'

Another area where their identity developed was in terms of how they saw their future selves. One of the mentees noted that she realized from a workshop that one needs to be self-reliant and purposeful whatever the circumstances are. She said that she had realized that the world would see you as a burden unless you can stand on your own feet.

Relationship with mentors: Most of the mentees recounted feeling apprehensive before their first meeting. A lot of them were unsure if their mentor would be able to engage and interact with them in a genuine manner. Mentees recounted that their fear disappeared quickly because their mentors engaged with them freely.

One mentee who said that her mentor was particularly frank and honest recounted a time when her mentor told her how she could not follow her dream career but did not let that come in the way of pursuing something else. The mentee said she realized the value of forming alternative careers through this story.

Mentees appeared to have close relationships with their mentors. One mentee said this about her relationship with her mentor: 'I can tell her everything—my fears, my anger, my worries, my pain, who I have yelled at. So I feel very happy about that.' Another mentee also echoed this sentiment. Her mentor emphasized to them that they must not see her as a teacher; they must see her as their friend or sister.

Mentees had also started looking up to their mentors and had started admiring some of their traits such as those

that made them good citizens. For example, one mentee said of her mentor,

She is very good. She is not only good to look at but also her mind is so good. She told us about herself; she works in this place where they help people who have speech and hearing difficulties. I felt very bad when she told us the type of problems they address. She also went to another hostel very similar to ours. There she spent some time with the girls and she told us that the girls are just like us.

Mentees also were able to see traits in mentors such as consistency and empathy that differentiated them from their (mentees') own family members.

One mentee said,

She is like a guiding light in my life. I have a sister; when she visits me she doesn't spend any time talking to me or finding out about how I am. She just gets me whatever I need and goes away. But when my mentor comes, every time she talks to me about any problems young girls face, how I must study, etc. She talks to me about bringing about a change in my mental feelings. I can tell her whatever is in my mind—in a personal way. She is my personal guide. When I tell her my problems, she gives me solutions. When I finished my 2nd year pre-university examination, I didn't do so well; I passed in 2nd class only. At that time I was feeling very bad. She told me not to feel bad; that nothing is impossible in life; I can achieve everything through hard work. She is a very good guide for me. Everything about her is very good.

Mentor Observations on the Programme

At the end of the 12 months of mentoring, the nine mentors who completed the programme were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview (Seidman, 1991). The purpose of the interview was to reflect on the mentoring relationships that had been formed over the course of the programme with specific references to how the relationships evolved, expectations of both the mentors as well as mentees, and successes and challenges faced from the point of view of the mentors. Five of the nine mentors did a face-to-face interview; three interviews were conducted via telephone. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.⁴

The mentors were happy with the way in which the relationships with their mentees had evolved over the course of the 12 months. Most described the early exchanges as conventional and not unlike the interaction between a teacher and student. This could have resulted from the first few sessions of the programme being focused on different aspects of English, an area of considerable challenge for most of the mentees. Another factor could be that the

mentees came into the programme with no clear ideas of what to expect from their mentors (which could speak of their very limited interactions with adults outside of the Home environment). As the sessions progressed the mentees grew to trust their mentors and gradually opened up about their personal lives, fears and apprehensions about the future, etc., and began to rely on their mentors' continued presence and support in the functioning of their lives.

Though the mentors approached the mentoring process in different ways, it appeared that they had formed personal relationships with their mentees which went beyond the boundaries of this programme. Most mentors expressed a strong desire to remain in contact with their mentees, a feeling reciprocated by their mentees.

The driving force for many of the mentors in this programme was the desire to give back to society and to ensure that disadvantaged girls, in particular, are given an opportunity to better their lot. That said, there were some differences amongst the mentors in terms of why they wanted to be a part of this programme, what they understood the mentoring process to be, as well as what they had hoped to accomplish by the end of the year. There seemed to be a clear distinction between older (>30 years) and younger (<30 years) mentors with respect to what they wanted their mentees to take away from the programme at the end of the 12-month interaction. For instance, when asked what they thought was absolutely crucial to instil in the girls or what message had to be communicated to them, one of the older mentors indicated that she was concerned with her mentees' behaviour being 'quite immature ... with bonding with the other girls' and 'they were a little childish and being eighteen now they should be old enough to understand things better and being in a Home they had to deal with certain things in a better way, in a matured way'. Another felt that life skills were the most important part of the programme—that whatever happens they (the girls) should not break down; that they should face life positively as that makes life very simple.

The younger mentors, however, have described wanting 'to give them (the mentees) the message that they need to be independent' and 'to make them understand that education could make them independent'. They wanted to give them the little push and motivation needed to make them believe in themselves. As one mentor said: '... so that they can see what they have and what potential they have and they have to excel in what they're good at' and stressed on how 'giving of your time especially to children goes such a long way in terms of moulding them and shaping their lives'.

In terms of addressing the areas of mentoring need, modest progress was made in improving English language skills. Several mentors noted that their mentees had a mental block towards practicing English, which made progress in that direction slow. Also, translating some of the course material into Kannada (the language of choice for most girls in the Home) was a trying process as the girls had a tendency to get caught up in understanding the meaning of the words more than the overall message or purpose of the exercise. Mentors also reported varying interest levels among the girls as a challenge. Some were very eager to be a part of this programme and participated wholeheartedly in all the activities but some needed to be constantly reminded of why they were a part of this whole exercise. For some mentors their own expectation of themselves and of the girls was an area of some concern. They had to come to terms with the fact that change would take time and would not happen quickly within a single year.

Conclusion

Mentoring has become a powerful youth empowerment tool worldwide. Its sway lies both in the emotional belief in the impact of strong relationships with adults, as well as in scientific research which has shown that well-structured mentoring programmes can result in positive developmental outcomes in youth.

As the economic context within India changes, inter-generational relationships, such as, those facilitated by mentoring programmes, will become extremely important to Indian youth. This article provided an introduction to key mentoring frameworks, theories and practices. We also narrated experiences of mentor and mentee participants who took part in an experimental mentoring programme for destitute girls in an urban, community context.

The participant narratives showed us that the idea of mentoring is still very new in India. While participants understood guidance and other associated concepts, they were not familiar with the mentoring role. Their previous norms of adult–youth relationships indicated a sense of fear of reprobation. There were some apprehensions at the start of the mentoring relationships because of these norms. However, these initial pre-conceptions were quickly dispelled. Mentee narratives show that they considered themselves close to their mentors. They were able to be their authentic selves in front of mentors.

Mentors also displayed high engagement with their mentees' lives. They were able to offer advice and suggestions

that were highly valued by mentees. Mentors performed a large variety of roles in their mentees' lives: they were valued as sounding boards or listening ears, role models who had admirable traits, and guides whose wisdom and experiences helped them offer more expert advice.

Mentoring has immense unexploited potential in India where the need of the hour is to prepare youth for the opportunities and challenges presented in a rapidly developing country. Mentoring also has significant potential in India because it appeals to the culture's guru–shishya traditions of passing knowledge, wisdom and skills from adults to young people. Mentoring democratizes these relationships a little more, to ensure that disadvantaged youth do not only sit at the feet of a mentor, but grow up with an ally by their side as they embark on journeys to new horizons.

Mentoring also has the advantage of scalability. Without any need for governmental mandates or programmes, every school and college can launch a mentoring initiative and adapt such programmes to local circumstances. They can reach out to locally resident professionals and others and engage them in mentoring programmes after a careful selection process and an appropriate training programme to set expectations and terms of engagement. They can partner with local non-government organizations to create mentoring programmes. As the case described in this article demonstrated, mentoring can have considerable positive impact on India's youth. Mentoring is therefore a potential 'game-changing' initiative that can be implemented right away to enable India's youth to become capable, confident and empowered—qualities that will stand them in good stead as the nation transforms.

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Notes

1. From <http://www.lml.lse.ac.uk/page16/page18/page18.html>
2. For children and adolescents, four to six members per group have been found to be the optimum size. It yields valuable information, avoids duplicate responses and provides more

genuine answers on account of absence of group/peer pressure (Wyatt, Krauskopf, & Davidson, 2008).

3. *Margadarshak* means a guide in the local Kannada language.
4. These interviews were conducted with the help of an external psychologist.

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