



Mentoring for care-experienced young people: A rapid review of program design

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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: In Australia, out-of-home care (OoHC) is provided to safeguard children and young people unable to live with their families. Typically, this care stops at 18 years of age, leaving many young people without the relational support to find employment and stable accommodation. Mentoring is increasingly proposed as a way to support young people exiting care, though the types of mentoring and contextual factors vary considerably. This rapid review aims to identify key features of mentoring programs that support young people in OoHC.

Methods: This paper utilised a rapid review methodology to survey the academic literature on mentoring programs with young people in OoHC. The authors conducted literature searches in October 2022 using a search string designed to provide targeted exposure to the literature. Articles were limited by year and location, with the specific search string and limitations applied to the Scopus database, and Proquest and Informit platforms.

Results: Utilising literature, we identified five overlapping models for mentor–mentee relationships into a provisional typology of five categories based on varying levels of formality and familiarity in the relationships: ‘formal’, ‘natural’, ‘near-age’, ‘peer’, and ‘therapeutic’. In doing so, we identified seven important features of mentor–mentee relationships: shared experiences, relationship duration, boundaries and other relationships, identity and self-worth, educational contexts, power and participation, and role modelling. We identified four issues relating to mentoring in OoHC that are informed by the needs and barriers experienced by young people: training and support for mentors, unique challenges faced by young people in OoHC, transition out of care, and the matching process. Lastly, we established what might impact mentoring programs by critically reflecting on the policy context and notions of empowerment.

Conclusion: This rapid review of mentoring programs for care-experienced young people seeking employment offers valuable insights to inform future programs. The findings highlight diverse and unclassified mentoring relationship types, the absence of anticipated gender-specific findings, a lack of examination of the policy context, and a need for more robust conceptualisations of empowerment.

1. Introduction

Mentoring is a popular intervention to support vulnerable young people (DuBois & Karcher, 2013) and has garnered particular attention in education settings in Australia (Curtis et al., 2012; Harwood et al., 2015; Willis et al., 2012). Research on youth mentoring programs consistently reports a number of benefits, including enhanced engagement in educational, community, social, and civic opportunities, as well as improved psychosocial, behavioural, and academic outcomes (DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016; Tolan et al., 2014; Wood &

Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Such findings are likely to compel many youth practitioners and support workers to consider mentoring programs. However, guiding frameworks in the literature are disjointed at best, with an absence of unifying or contemporary ‘best practice’ frameworks. Responding to this gap, we undertook a rapid review to identify key features of programs from across the literature that could inform such a framework.

This rapid review is part of a larger project¹ funded by the Jack Brockhoff Foundation Children and Youth Grants Program. Drawing on the latest international peer-reviewed literature on youth mentoring, the

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project aims to inform the design of a mentoring program tailored for young people who are exiting out-of-home care (OoHC) and seeking employment. Initially, the authors sought to identify practice principles in the mentoring literature that would translate into a publicly available practice guide for practitioners and policy-makers specifically working to support young care-experienced women. However, there was a gap in the literature specifically focusing on young women.

We anticipated there to be distinct literature on mentoring young women in OoHC as this group encounter distinct challenges (Mendes, 2011), including an elevated risk of substance abuse, homelessness, and contact with the criminal justice system (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2011), as well as a higher likelihood of experiencing learning and physical disabilities (Campo and Commerford, 2011). Their experiences in care, particularly residential care, are considered a site for exposure to issues like substance abuse and criminal behaviour as they are routinely a 'place of last resort' (Moeller-Saxone et al., 2016) for young women in care. Therefore, given the lack of literature specifically focusing on young women in OoHC and the anticipated feature of a mentoring program, we expanded the scope of this review to encompass all young people with OoHC experience.

Adding to their history of trauma, young people in OoHC must grapple with the challenging transition to independent living at the age of 18 (Moeller-Saxone et al., 2016; The Constellation Project, 2022). As such, 'an enduring and emotionally salient tie with an important adult' that provides a young person with 'an ongoing pattern of support and guidance' (DuBois & Karcher, 2013, p. 5) would appear to offer an intuitive solution to the disruption of the transition out of care. In the reviewed literature there were various labels employed to describe the design of mentoring programs and the nature of the mentoring relationship. The absence of a standardised typology of mentoring in the reviewed literature made components of a rapid review, such as a comparison and assessment of quality across programs, untenable. Instead, we have organised these models into a provisional typology of five categories that reflect distinctions between mentoring relationships and varying levels of formality and familiarity: 'formal', 'natural', 'near-age', 'peer', and 'therapeutic'. These categories include some commonalities, however, we argue that their distinctions indicate critical choices in program design. We outline these categories following an overview of the rapid review methods.

Following the overview of mentoring categories, we report our findings regarding the key features of mentoring programs. We identified seven important features of mentoring program design: (1) shared experiences; (2) the duration of the relationship; (3) boundaries and other relationships; (4) a focus on identity or self-worth; (5) educational contexts; (6) power and participation; and (7) role modelling. Additionally, we found four contextual challenges that were significant for young people in OoHC: (1) training and support for mentors; (2) unique challenges in OoHC; (3) transition out of care; and (4) the matching process.

Following a narrative synthesis of our rapid review findings, we provide a critical discussion that unpacks two underexplored issues in the literature despite their potential to influence mentoring outcomes: (1) the policy context and (2) conceptualisations of empowerment. We argue that despite its popularity of mentoring as an intervention and the wealth of available literature, it remains an area of practice and research that is under scrutinised and theorised, particularly concerning gender and power relationships. This rapid review offers a bridge between peer-reviewed literature on youth mentoring and knowledge users, while also identifying opportunities for future research.

2. Methods

The current study employed a rapid review methodology, defined as 'a form of knowledge synthesis that accelerates the process of conducting a traditional systematic review through streamlining or omitting a variety of methods to produce evidence in a resource-efficient manner'

(Hamel et al., 2021, p. 80). Unlike the exhaustive and highly sensitive strategies (Paré et al., 2015) of systematic reviews, rapid reviews use 'systematic review methods to search and critically appraise existing research' (Grant and Booth, 2009, p. 95). Conversely, a rapid review is more rigorous than the exploratory nature of scoping reviews.

Rapid reviews are intentionally time-limited, reflecting their purpose to inform policy and program design. Grant & Booth (2009) argue that rapid reviews increase the potential for bias because they overlook contradictions and inconsistencies in the literature. However, there is evidence that rapid reviews return similar conclusions to systematic reviews (O'Leary et al., 2017), and subsequently are an important tool given the rapid nature of program and policy development.

2.1. Aims and research questions

Our initial objective was to investigate mentoring models that prioritise non-hierarchical structures, trauma-responsiveness, and cultural awareness. We aimed to examine how these models could be adapted for service providers working with care-experienced young women, as part of our funded work with the Jack Brockhoff Foundation. However, our initial review exposed that such models did not exist in the literature within the rapid review parameters. Therefore, we revised our aims to explore the key features of mentoring programs that do exist for young people in OoHC more broadly. Specifically, this review aims to investigate key features of mentoring models in recent peer-reviewed literature that address the needs of care-experienced young people. As such, we designed research questions that would provide our stakeholders with a timely and contemporary knowledge synthesis to design a mentoring program. While there are methodologies utilised to design questions, for instance, the Cochrane Review acronym PICO (normally used in health research for effects of interventions not program design), we chose to follow Doody and Bailey (2016), p. 19) argument that 'knowledgeable people about the research' are essential to setting research questions. Consequently, designed our research questions with the stakeholders in mind to ensure we could meaningfully translate the knowledge synthesis to the stakeholder to inform their practice.

1. What are the key features of mentoring programs in the contemporary peer-reviewed literature?
2. To what extent are mentoring programs informed by the needs and barriers experienced by young people in OoHC?
3. What gaps or issues exist in the contemporary literature that might affect the impact of mentoring programs?

2.2. Protocol

To synthesise insights into mentoring best practices for vulnerable populations, we conducted a rapid review utilising methodologies outlined by O'Leary et al. (2016) and Khangura et al. (2012). We also visually summarised the screening process through a modification of the PRISMA 2009 diagram (Fig. 1). This visual representation was chosen as we focused specifically on peer-reviewed journal articles. The complexity of the updated PRISMA 2020 guidelines was considered overly complex for the project. Our methodological process was constrained by the funding requirement that the review, program design, and trial were to be completed within 12 months. The review had to provide practitioners with a synthesis of academic literature that can be used to inform future models of mentoring for young people exiting OoHC.

2.3. Search strategy and screening

Given the above purpose, we limited our literature search to peer-reviewed studies eliminating government reports, theses, and grey literature for two reasons. First, the project aimed to provide practitioners access to research typically hosted behind paywalls. Secondly,

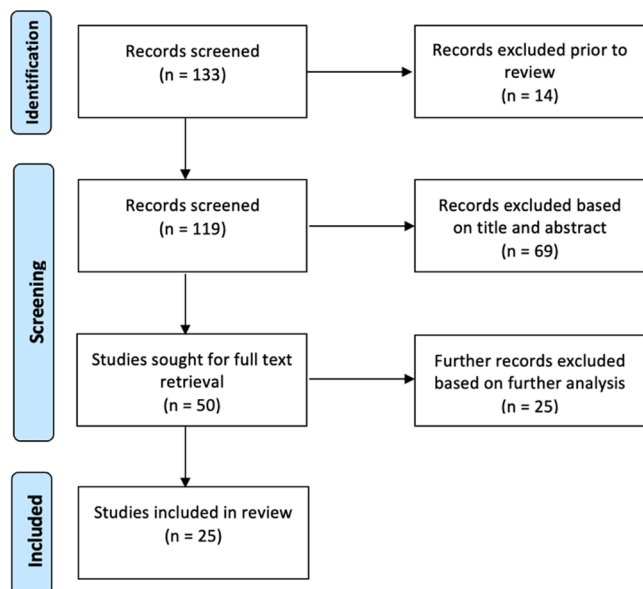


Fig. 1. Retrieval process.

due to the time constraints hand searching government reports, theses, and grey literature was not feasible.

Literature searches were conducted in October 2022 by applying a specific search string and limitations to the Scopus, Proquest and Informit. The terms for the search string were developed in consultation with our industry partner and were intentionally broad in order to capture programs employing contemporary practice frameworks (non-hierarchical structures, trauma-responsiveness, and cultural awareness). The search string was: Mentor* (abstract) and ‘Leaving care’ OR ‘Care leavers’ OR ‘Out-of-home care’ OR ‘Family foster care’ OR ‘Kinship care’ (anywhere in document). The Scopus database and Proquest platforms were chosen for their extensive full-text coverage across several social science disciplines while the Informit platform was chosen as it, largely, offers Australian-specific databases. In each search location articles were limited by type, year and location. We limited the search in two ways. Firstly, to journal articles only and articles published since 2010. This was done to facilitate an accelerated knowledge synthesis that kept to the parameters of the funding and prioritised contemporary research that the funder would not otherwise have access to. Secondly, articles were limited to comparable social, political and economic regions (namely, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia).

Many countries have long-established approaches to the provision of OoHC services, however, ‘little attention has been given to how international differences in the age structures of the OoHC population reflects different welfare regimes and approaches to service provision’ (Healy, Lundstrom & Sallnas, 2011, p. 417). Aligning with this work and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW]. (2010), we conceptualise OoHC as the ‘provision of accommodation and care for children and young people outside their family by order of, or agreement between, the State and the family of the child or young person’. We also note alternative terminologies are being used within the literature, such as ‘care leavers’ and ‘care experienced’ young people.

Once all articles were collected using the above search strategy, citations were downloaded to EndNote and duplicates were removed by the third author. Data was then extracted and organised by the third author using an adaption of Arksey and O’Malley (2005) framework categories: title, abstract, full reference and key words. This was exported to an Excel file, by the third author, where the first and second author could undertake the screening process. The first and second authors then examined titles, abstracts and key words to exclude articles that did not fit the research questions. The full-text of articles that were not clearly relevant were downloaded as full-texts for further

examination. Following this, full-texts of all included articles were downloaded, read and data was extracted by the third author. The third author then built upon Arksey and O’Malley (2005) framework categories to add context/background, aims/research questions/hypotheses, methodology, state/country of study, findings, and core argument. Although Arksey and O’Malley (2005) framework was established for scoping reviews rather than rapid reviews, this supported reviewing the literature across multiple authors. Lastly, the first and second authors then reviewed the spreadsheet to further refine the articles to be included or excluded. At this stage, the third author read the articles being considered for full-text eligibility and extracted the following categories: ‘classification 1’ (mentor outcome or focus, mentee outcome or focus, and program design) and ‘classification 2’ (type of mentoring: natural mentoring, near age mentoring etc.).

2.4. Data extraction and analysis

Extracted data was subsequently synthesised and reflexive thematically coded using NVivo by the first author using a ‘recursive process’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 86) requiring ‘continual bending back on oneself’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 549) and organising codes into a ‘thematic network’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001), through stages of familiarisation, generating initial themes, reviewing, consolidating and developing new themes.

The first round of coding focussed on identifying mentoring models and the features of these types. Subsequently, mentoring models were consolidated into the five categories described in this review (‘formal’, ‘natural’, ‘near-age’, ‘peer’, and ‘therapeutic’). A second round identified consistent and frequent features within these mentoring models and consolidated them into seven elements and four contextual challenges presented in this review (Table 1). The second and fourth authors reviewed the narrative synthesis and developed the discussion, which was then checked for accuracy and bias by the third author.

This review presents a narrative synthesis of the findings resulting from the coding process. To address the first and second research questions we begin by first outlining the categories of mentoring program design. We then present the key features of mentoring program design to address the first question, and then the contextual issues to address the second research question. We address the third question regarding gaps and issues in our discussion section.

The final spreadsheet for data analysis included the following: title, abstract, full reference, keywords, context/background, aims/research questions/hypotheses, methodology, state/country of study, classification 1 (mentor outcome or focus, mentee outcome or focus, and program design) and classification 2 (type of mentoring: natural mentoring, near-age mentoring etc.). The studies reviewed are summarised in Table 2.

Table 1
Initial and secondary coding.

Initial coding	Secondary coding
Consolidated mentoring models	Subsequent consolidated codes within mentoring models
Formal	Program elements
Natural	Shared experiences
Near-age	Duration
Peer	Other relationships
Therapeutic	Identity or self-worth
	Educational contexts
	Power and participation
	Role modelling
	Contextual challenges
	Training and support
	Unique challenges
	Transition
	Matching

Table 2
Summary table of articles.

Authors and year of publication	Title	Location	Methodology and data collection method	Mentoring type	Focus
Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Garrison, M., Spencer, R., Richardson, L. P., & Lozano, P. (2011)	Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care	United States	Qual. – interviews	Natural	Mentee outcome
Avery, R. J. (2011)	The potential contribution of mentor programs to relational permanency for youth aging out of foster care	International	Literature review	Natural and Formal	Mentee outcome
Bruster, B. E., & Coccoma, P. (2013)	Mentoring for Educational Success: Advancing Foster Care Youth Incorporating the Core Competencies	United States	Quant. – survey	Near-age	Mentee outcome and program design
Cosma, P., & Soni, A. (2020)	The Mission Mentoring Programme: an initiative for council employees to become mentors to looked after children	United Kingdom	Qual. – case study	Formal	Mentee and mentor outcome
Dallos, R., & Carder-Gilbert, H. (2019)	Taking the stone from my heart: An exploration of the benefits of a mentoring programme (PROMISE) for children at risk of significant harm	United Kingdom	Mixed Methods – audit Data and questionnaires with qualitative responses	Formal	Mentee outcome
Hudson, A. L. (2013)	Career mentoring needs of youths in foster care: Voices for change.	United States	Qual. – focus groups	Formal	Mentee outcome and program design
Johnson, S. B., Pryce, J. M., & Martinovich, Z. (2011).	The role of therapeutic mentoring in enhancing outcomes for youth in foster care	United States	Quant. - outcome assessment	Therapeutic	Mentee outcome and program design
Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P. H., Amos, J., Todd, B., & Carpenter, S. (2021).	Addressing Intergenerational Trauma in an Adolescent Reunification Program: Case Studies Illustrating Service Innovation	Australia	Mixed Methods - interviews and questionnaires	Formal	Parent-child outcomes and program design
Mantovani, N., Gillard, S., Mezey, G., & Clare, F. (2020)	Children and Young People 'In Care' Participating in a Peer-Mentoring Relationship: An Exploration of Resilience	United Kingdom	Qual. - interviews	Peer	Mentee outcome
Mendes, P. (2011)	Towards a community development support model for young people transitioning from state out-of-home care: A case study of St Luke's Anglicare in Victoria, Australia	Australia	Qual. - interviews	Multiple	Mentee outcome
Pinkerton, J. (2011)	Constructing a global understanding of the social ecology of leaving out of home care	International	Qual. - interviews	Formal	Mentee outcome and program design
Powers, L. E., Fullerton, A., Schmidt, J., Geenen, S., Oberweiser-Kennedy, M., Dohn, J., ... Blakeslee, J. (2018)	Perspectives of youth in foster care on essential ingredients for promoting self-determination and successful transition to adult life: My life model	United States	Qual. - interviews	Near-age	Mentee outcome
Spencer, R., Drew, A. L., Gowdy, G., & Horn, J. P. (2018)	'A positive guiding hand': A qualitative examination of youth-initiated mentoring and the promotion of interdependence among foster care youth	United States	Qual. - interviews	Natural	Mentee outcome
Stelter, R. L., Kupersmidt, J. B., & Stump, K. N. (2018)	Supporting Mentoring Relationships of Youth in Foster Care: Do Program Practices Predict Match Length?	United States	Quant. - questionnaires	Natural	Mentee outcome
Yafi, S. A., Melkman, E., & Hellman, C. M. (2019)	Nurturing the hope of youth in care: The contribution of mentoring	Israel	Quant. - survey	Natural and Formal	Mentee outcome
Zilberstein, K., & Spencer, R. (2017)	Breaking bad: an attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationship closures	United States	Literature review	Formal	Mentee outcome (specific to the conclusion of the program)
Sulimani-Aidan Y. (2018)	Present, protective, and promotive: Mentors' roles in the lives of young adults in residential care.	Israel	Qual. - interviews	Natural and Formal	Mentee outcome
Hatzikiiriakidis, K., Hillman, C., Soh, S.-E., Savaglio, M., O'Donnell, R., & Ayton, D. (2021).	The implementation of Australian Youth Mentoring Programmes: An examination of strengths and limitations through stakeholder engagement.	Australia	Mixed Methods – survey and interviews	Formal	Mentee outcome and program design
Snow, K., H., S., S., K., J., K., A., D. O., & P., M. (2013).	Aspirations And Belonging: Touchstones For The Journey	Canada	Theoretical	Near-age	The concept of belonging
Miller, J. M., Barnes, J. C., Ventura Miller, H., & McKinnon, L. (2012)	Exploring the Link between Mentoring Program Structure & Success Rates: Results from a National Survey	United States	Quant. - survey	Formal	Mentee outcome
Greeson, J. K. P., Weiler, L. M., Thompson, A. E., & Taussig, H. N. (2016)	A First Look At Natural Mentoring Among Preadolescent Foster Children	United States	Mixed Methods - survey, Interview and report data	Natural	Mentee characteristics
Tobolowsky, B.F., Madden, E.E., & Scannapieco, M. (2017)	Living on the Edge: The Postsecondary Journeys of Foster Care Alumni	United States	Mixed Methods - survey and interviews	Peer	College outcomes
Gonzalez, R., Cameron, C., & Klendo, L. (2012)	The therapeutic family model of care: An attachment and trauma informed approach to transitional planning	United States	Mixed Methods	Therapeutic	Care outcomes
O'Donnell R, MacRae A, Savaglio M, Vicary D, Green (nee Cox) R, Mendes P, Kerridge G, Currie G, Diamond S, and Skouteris H (2020)	'It was daunting. I was 18 and I left residential care and there was no support whatsoever': a scoping study into the transition from out-of-home-care process in Tasmania, Australia	Australia	Qual. – interviews	Multiple	Leaving care outcome
Knight, R. (2013)	Reading with Angels: Improving Literacy among Children in Foster Care	Australia	Quant. - questionnaires	Formal	Mentee outcome

3. Operationalising mentoring relationship categories

The reviewed studies utilised various terms to describe the relationships between mentors and mentees. These terms were routinely presented in the literature as intuitive and without authors providing a formal definition. We have categorised these into five overlapping approaches to mentoring based on varying levels of formality and familiarity: 'formal', 'natural', 'near-age', 'peer', and 'therapeutic'. The categories are not always distinct, with some overlap and shifting between categories.

'Formal' mentoring refers to a relationship between a mentor and mentee that has been created or formalised through a structured program (Hatzikiriakidis et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2013; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). In this approach, mentees and mentors may or may not have a pre-existing relationship.

'Natural' mentoring refers to a relationship between mentor and mentee where the participants have a prior relationship that 'naturally' developed through interactions in a formal setting (e.g. school, recreation, or service setting) or through informal social networks (e.g. familiar or relational settings) (Greeson et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Natural mentoring may or may not be formalised into an official mentoring relationship.

'Near-age' mentoring refers to a relationship in which the mentor and mentee are close in age (Powers et al., 2018) compared to traditional models of mentoring, where a more senior mentor supports a typically younger mentee (Karcher, 2005). Near-age mentoring may or may not be formalised or naturally occurring, and the exact age difference between mentor and mentee is not clearly defined in the reviewed literature.

'Peer' mentoring is a relationship where the mentor and mentee relationship is defined by being very close in age or life experience between participants (Mendes, 2011; Snow, 2013). The distinction between peer and near-age mentoring is not clearly defined in the reviewed literature, and as such, there is likely significant overlap and variability in the interpretation of these categories in practice. An important point of distinction between near-age and peer-mentoring is the principle that peer-mentoring relationships are likely to have a significant shared life experience. As with near-age mentoring, peer-mentoring may or may not be formalised or naturally occurring (Mantovani et al., 2020).

Finally, 'therapeutic' mentoring refers to a mentoring program that is explicitly informed by a therapeutic model of intervention with specific aims (Gonzalez et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2011). This model is inherently formal, and unlikely to be natural, near-age, or peer-mentoring.

Hence, the various terms that have been used to describe the relationships between mentors and mentees are routinely presented as intuitive and without authors providing a formal definition. We have attempted to provide clear definitions here.

4. Key features of mentoring programs: Responding to research question 1

The rapid review identified seven features of mentoring program design that were significant across several mentoring categories: (1) shared experiences; (2) duration; (3) boundaries and other relationships; (4) focussing on identity or self-worth; (5) educational contexts; (6) power and participation; (7) role modelling.

4.1. Shared experiences between mentor and mentee

The importance of shared experiences between mentor and mentees was discussed in formal, natural and peer-mentoring contexts. These shared experiences could relate to being in care or other shared experiences and interests. In formal mentoring contexts, Cosma and Soni (2020) argue the mentors' specialised knowledge, particularly in areas

of interest to the mentee, such as experience in a desired career, can be a valuable asset. Mentor relationships formed solely on the mentors' skills, without any prior knowledge or shared experience, were perceived as less advantageous compared to mentor relationships established on the basis of shared interests (Cosma & Soni, 2020).

Ahrens et al. (2011) argue that in natural mentoring contexts, it was considered important that there be a degree of commonality between mentor and mentee regarding their relational style. This commonality was considered to be an important factor in developing the required trust within mentoring (Ahrens et al., 2011; Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019). In peer mentoring contexts, shared biographical experiences, strengths and a sense of humour (Powers et al., 2018) or interests, such as sport (Mendes, 2011), were considered to be particularly beneficial for young people in care. Shared experiences in care were uniquely important, as they fostered a sense of connection and support that young people felt they could not get from professionals (such as social workers and support workers) and carers (Mantovani et al., 2020). Mantovani et al., (2020) found that shared experience was also important in understanding the experience of stigma from being in OoHC. O'Donnell et al. (2020) stated that employing mentors with care experience was a challenge; however, they were favoured by mentees as they could offer authentic advice and support specifically pertaining to the challenges in exiting care.

4.2. Duration of the relationship

The duration of the relationship and its impact on the mentoring dynamics and outcomes was discussed across formal, natural and therapeutic mentoring contexts. Within formal mentoring contexts, generally 'the duration of mentoring relationships was also positively correlated with youth success' (Miller et al., 2013, p. 452), and specifically sustaining the mentoring relationship over longer periods increased the likelihood of positive effects for young people in OoHC (Avery, 2011). Ahrens et al. (2011) found that providing training to mentors was linked to improving the quality and duration of the relationship. Similarly, Stelter et al. (2018) found that programs that complied with practices such as recruitment, screening, training, matching, monitoring and support, and closure were effective predictors of the longevity of mentoring relationships with young people in OoHC.

Sulimani-Aidan et al. (2019) argued that duration was associated with the promotion of hope in young people in OoHC both in formal and natural mentoring contexts. Similarly, Stelter et al. (2018) argued the vulnerability of young people in OoHC meant natural mentoring programs require standards that are rigorously maintained to ensure greater longevity. Mentees' recommendation of mentoring to other young people at risk of significant harm was influenced by the presence of a lasting relationship that extended beyond formal mentoring programs, possibly transforming into a natural mentoring relationship (Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019).

Sulimani-Aidan's (2018) focuss on natural mentoring in residential care, described a significant mentoring relationship as one that spans at least three years. In contrast, Johnson et al., (2011) observed a decrease in trauma-associated symptoms for young people in OoHC who participated in therapeutic mentoring for 12 to 18 months. Mentees who did not participate in the therapeutic mentoring program experienced worsened symptoms from the baseline data. Johnson et al., (2011) argue that in addition to the existing literature supporting the importance of sustained mentoring relationships, the duration may have a larger impact on young people in OoHC and be an important protective factor for young people who have experienced trauma.

4.3. Boundaries and other relationships

Some studies discussed long-held principles, such as building trust, to achieve a successful mentoring relationship (Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019). However, striking among the reviewed literature was discussions

of how the mentoring relationship interacted and impacted on other relationships. Formal mentoring was presented as having a positive impact on the mentee's other relationships such as friends and caregivers (Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019). However, it was important to establish boundaries so that the mentor–mentee relationship was not impinged upon by these other relationships (Hatzikiriakidis et al., 2021); e.g. parents becoming overly involved in the relationship.

Formal mentoring was also reported as having a positive impact on reducing social isolation (Hatzikiriakidis et al., 2021). Furthermore, peer-mentoring tackled feelings of loneliness for young people in OoHC through the opportunity to discuss personal issues that they were uncomfortable discussing with professionals and caregivers (Mantovani et al., 2020). Greeson et al., (2016) reported that children with a natural mentor had a stronger attachment to friends. Near-age mentoring for young people in OoHC includes an inherent opportunity to connect with other young people who were the same age or 'near-peers' and share similar life experiences (Powers et al., 2018). Finally, Johnson et al., (2011) argue that young people in OoHC receiving therapeutic mentoring, as compared to their peers who did not, demonstrated improved family and social functioning.

4.4. Focusing on identity or self-worth

In Sulimani-Aidan's (2018) study of formal and natural mentoring for young adults in residential care, they described two types of mentors: the 'present and supportive mentor' and the 'motivating and catalysing mentor'. Of the two, the latter was described by participants as having a positive impact on their life and self-perception by helping to shift their worldview, motivating them to aim high and embrace strategies to cope with challenges. In their engagement with stakeholders, Hatzikiriakidis et al. (2021) found that three out of the four main perceived outcomes of mentoring revolved around self-esteem, confidence, personal value and self-respect, and the motivation to achieve personal goals. However, cautioning against undue optimism in these kinds of outcomes, Avery (2011) cited an earlier study from 2004 in which African-American young people experienced no improvement in self-esteem compared to a control group for those participating in mentoring.

4.5. Educational contexts

Mentoring experienced a rapid rise in the early 2000s in educational settings internationally and, in some instances, its potential impact has reached mythical levels (Colley, 2007). Claims regarding educational outcomes were a feature across, formal, natural, near-age and therapeutic mentoring. Avery (2011) discovered that both formal and natural mentoring contexts can have a positive influence on young people exiting OoHC by improving their attitudes towards education and employment, though other studies cited did not observe this impact. One near-age mentoring project recruited social work students to mentor young people in OoHC. They found mentoring supported young people in care to make 'positive decisions' (Bruster & Cocco, 2013, p. 398) about post-secondary education and training and participants had 'high academic self-efficacy' (p. 398). Likewise, Johnson et al., (2011) identified that therapeutic mentoring demonstrated improvements in school-based achievement and behaviour.

4.6. Power and participation

Several studies examined the power dynamics within mentoring and the degree to which mentoring supported mentee-led decision-making. Within formal mentoring for 'looked after young people', Cosma and Soni. (2020) argued it was important to have a relationship that aimed to promote a power balance through rapport and connection. Powers et al. (2018) advocated for a 'youth-directed coaching relationship' (p. 281) model for near-age mentoring of young people in foster care to support the transition to adulthood. This model is underpinned by the

aim of supporting young people to pursue their self-identified goals and the vision they hold for their future. They evidenced the need for four principles: (1) respect, non-judgemental acceptance and honesty; (2) reliable practical help and encouragement; (3) shared experiences, humour and strengths; and (4) reciprocal affirmation and recognition of capability and confidence (Powers et al., 2018). By comparison, Mantovani et al., (2020) argue that peer-mentors for young people in OoHC play an important role in both advocating for young people around stressful life events and in developing mentee's connection with others and themselves to develop the emotional competencies around decision-making.

4.7. Role modelling

Finally, the part that mentors play as role-models for mentees was discussed across several types. Hatzikiriakidis et al., (2021) describe formal mentoring as involving someone from whom mentees desired to seek advice and guidance, and with whom they could ideally develop a social relationship. The role of the mentor as a role model was also emphasised in several papers about natural mentoring.

The promotion of hope in young people in OoHC was positively associated with mentors who took on a model function alongside mentors who provided warmth and autonomy (Yafi et al., 2019). Sulimani-Aidan (2018) likewise reinforced the importance of warmth along with care in mentoring young people in residential care. They categorised this type of mentor as a 'present and supportive mentor' (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018, p. 72). One of the key functions of the present and supportive mentor was to act as a role model and a parental figure (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Finally, peer-mentors for young people in OoHC were also described as role models who could inspire their mentees by example (Mantovani et al., 2020).

In answering research question one, what are the key features of mentoring programs in the contemporary peer-reviewed literature?, the review identified seven features of mentoring program design that were significant across several mentoring categories: (1) shared experiences; (2) duration; (3) boundaries and other relationships; (4) focussing on identity or self-worth; (5) educational contexts; (6) power and participation; (7) role modelling.

5. The extent to which mentoring programs informed by the needs and barriers experienced by young people in OoHC: Responding to research question 2

In addition to the above key features of mentoring programs, we identified four contextual challenges that were significant for young people in OoHC: (1) training and support for mentors; (2) unique challenges faced by young people in OoHC; (3) transition out of care; and (4) the matching process.

5.1. Training and support for mentors

In both formal and natural mentoring contexts, there was extensive discussion of the necessity of training and support for mentors. Young people in OoHC were presented as facing complex challenges, emphasising the heightened need for training and support (Stelter et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2019). This support could be in the form of specialised training (Ahrens et al., 2011), ongoing training (Miller et al., 2013), mentor planning (Yafi et al., 2019), adherence to mentoring standards (Stelter et al., 2018), supervision around issues such as race and culture (Pinkerton, 2011), and training on establishing and ending relationships (Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). Zilberstein and Spencer (2017) argued that poorly managed conclusions of mentoring relationships can negatively impact young people's likelihood to engage in new mentoring opportunities, underscoring the importance of thorough mentor training and support.

Miller et al. (2013) argued that providing training to mentors boosts

the frequency of interactions as well as the duration of mentoring. They also advocated for developing evidence-based practices, particularly for remote settings where fewer mentorship options may be available. Ahrens et al. (2011) concurred that training offered benefits to the duration and also the quality of mentoring relationships, and insisted that improved training, and matching, for mentors are necessary to improve outcomes for young people in OoHC. In contrast, Dallos and Carder-Gilbert. (2019) reported from their study that mentees at risk of significant harm did not see mentors in professional terms, raising some questions about important limitations in training for mentors to avoid issues associated with professional services.

5.2. Unique challenges faced by young people in OoHC

An important theme that crossed peer, formal and therapeutic mentoring was the unique and significant challenges faced by young people in OoHC. These challenges include stereotyping and stigma (Cosma & Soni, 2020; Mantovani et al., 2020; Mendes, 2011; Tobolowsky et al., 2017), trauma (Johnson et al., 2011), transience (Hudson, 2013) and caring responsibilities (Dallos & Carder-Gilbert, 2019). These challenges can be exacerbated by factors such as poor transition planning, limited autonomy while in care, heavy caseworker loads, limited housing opportunities and inadequate post-care support (O'Donnell et al., 2020). Stelter et al. (2018) argued that community-based mentoring, as compared to site-based, is more appropriate for young people in OoHC as they have a greater need for community and non-school-based connections. They also stressed the significance of benchmarks and practice standards for this population due to their increased vulnerability.

Gonzalez et al., (2012) argued that therapeutic mentoring offers young people in OoHC opportunities for personal growth, including new experiences, daily routines, expanded social networks, and support for others. They also suggested that a therapeutic mentoring model provides an alternative to the 'life membership' that is often available to young people not in care, which typically provides a 'home' to return to during times of struggle or celebration.

Stigma was a significant theme and barrier to successful community reintegration for young people in OoHC, with implications for education when it manifested in school setting, including from teachers and peers (Tobolowsky et al., 2017). Stigma was exacerbated if they live in a small rural or regional community (Mendes, 2011). The solidarity and emotional support of peer mentoring was described as an important strategy for managing stigma (Mantovani et al., 2020), and mentoring de-stigmatised a mentor's understanding of young people in care (Cosma & Soni, 2020).

5.3. Transition out of care

Mentors were identified as an important support to ensuring young people's successful transition out of care. Gonzalez et al., (2012) argued therapeutic mentoring can be part of a structured 6 – 12-month intensive process in the lead up to transition to support skill development and prevent feelings of abandonment. In a study by O'Donnell et al. (2020), mentors ranked as the second most preferred support option among young people existing OoHC, valued for providing personal, genuine and authentic advice and support. Similarly, Ahrens et al. (2011) argued for the inclusion of non-parental adults in the transition planning process.

A sense of belonging was also promoted as an important facilitator of successful transition (Snow, 2013). Sulimani-Aidan (2018) argued for the development of mentoring policies that enabled the formal continuation of mentoring beyond the transition, given their finding that few care-leavers reported having a mentor in their current social network. When mentors maintained contact after the formal relationship ended, Dallos and Carder-Gilbert. (2019) found young people were more likely to recommend mentoring to others. Consistently, mentors were recommended as essential community stakeholders and support for young

people in OoHC (O'Donnell et al., 2020), and Mendes (2011) specifically argued that mentoring is a key strategy to promote links with support beyond the care system.

5.4. The matching process

The matching process garnered significant attention in various mentoring projects. A specialised matching process for youth-initiated mentoring (Spencer et al., 2018) and greater attention to the criteria and needs of young people in OoHC was proposed in several studies (Ahrens et al., 2011; Stelter et al., 2018). Cosma and Soni. (2020) advocated for a more proactive matching approach which involved a greater level of participation by the mentee. The authors also found that a mentor's skills were less important than shared interests in creating beneficial mentoring matches. Barriers were discovered to successful matching including lack of available mentors in rural and remote settings (Miller et al., 2013). Hatzikiriakidis et al., (2021) found that mentees typically sought mentors who provided guidance but also developed a social relationship. Stelter et al. (2018) found that young people in OoHC were more likely to be matched with a mentor at an older age than young people not in OoHC, suggesting a hesitancy to match young people in high-risk situations.

In answering research question two, to what extent are mentoring programs informed by the needs and barriers experienced by young people in OoHC?, the review identified four contextual challenges that were significant for young people in OoHC: (1) training and support for mentors; (2) unique challenges faced by young people in OoHC; (3) transition out of care; and (4) the matching process.

6. Gaps, issues and impact on mentoring: Responding to research question 3

In this section, we outline the gaps and issues in the reviewed literature and discuss the potential impact on mentoring programs. One critical gap is a typology of mentoring models. Categorising different types of mentor–mentee relationships would facilitate better comparisons between outcome evaluation to inform policy-making and program design. A standardised typology of mentoring types would allow practitioners to compare outcomes with other mentoring programs in the same category, as well as improve program design by helping to identify the mentoring type most suited to the context and desired outcome. What successful mentoring relationships look like, and for whom, varies significantly depending upon the context and type of mentoring that is undertaken. To achieve this kind of typology would require a more extensive review than undertaken in this paper. However, it is clear from this review that the design of mentoring programs is not solely determined by evidence-based decision-making, and moreover, what evidence counts is often determined by the prevailing policy context. As such, this discussion focuses on two themes that were identified in the literature that raise critical questions about mentoring design, namely, (1) policy context and (2) notions of empowerment.

6.1. Policy context

Pinkerton (2011) observed clear variations in mentoring design for young people in different national and policy contexts. When Hudson (2013) asked participants why they thought mentoring did not solve problems like lack of employment and education for young people in OoHC, they highlighted the role of economic systems rather than individual skills. Tobolowsky et al. (2017) argued that policy plays a significant role in the discontinuation of tertiary study for young people who have exited OoHC. Cosma and Soni. (2020) describe a desire among mentors to expand their program to have wider societal impact. These insights raise critical questions about the policy context in Australia and the kinds of mentoring programs that are likely to be funded and culturally celebrated.

Neoliberalism is the dominant policy, and arguably cultural, narrative in Australia (Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2021; Pilotta, 2016) that champions the virtue of the competitive individual as the basis for success in the job and resource marketplace (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Harvey, 2005). Youth and community services are routinely funded through competitive funding arrangements to deliver individualised services (like mentoring) as solutions to large economic and social issues (Emslie, 2019; Lohmeyer & McGregor, 2021; McGregor, 2017). Mentoring offers an attractive individualised and culturally celebrated solution through which the heroic individual proffers wisdom to the uninitiated to prepare them for competitive success (Colley, 2007). In this policy and cultural context, formalised, structured and targeted mentoring interventions by professionals would have a greater appeal than supporting natural, peer and long-term mutually beneficial relationships. In this light, mentoring for young people in and exiting OoHC is likely to be limited by the concerns of neoliberalism and reflect the desire for economically, productive adults.

6.2. Empowerment discourse

Several studies examined the power dynamics in mentoring and its hierarchical nature. The idea of mentoring traces its popular mythical origins back to Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus appoints an elder named Mentor as the guardian of his son as he heads off to war (Colley, 2007). The mythical Greek god Athene takes human form as Mentor and guides the boy into manhood. This relationship is emblematic of the typically hierarchical mentoring relationship with an older or more experienced (god-like) figure supporting and imparting wisdom to a younger participant (Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1179). This child, reflecting the critiques of the traditional linear transition to adulthood from youth studies (White & Wyn, 2011; Wyn & White, 1997), has yet to reach a stage of being recognised as fully capable of exercising their rights and responsibilities of full citizenship. Unsurprisingly, there have been a lack of research on the benefit for the 'senior' peer or 'provider' (Burton et al., 2021; Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1179).

Service delivery models that often promote 'empowerment' outcomes have been heavily critiqued for their oversimplification of the nature of power relationships (Batsleer, 2008; Lohmeyer, 2017); Sercombe, 2010). Empowerment discourses typically imply a kind of relationship in which the service provider gives or transfers power to the service receiver through advocacy, encouragement or their mere presence (Sercombe, 1992, 1998). Conversely, advocacy can be criticised as paradoxically stealing the opportunity for individuals to seek their own interests, and instead reflecting the interest of the professional middle class more generally.

While the models examined in the literature reviewed in this paper provide certain insights into shared decision-making, participatory processes, and the principles of shared power, the framing of the relationship as mentoring inevitably associates it with a hierarchical structure, which serves as a foundation for program design. This observation highlights the insufficient exploration of power dynamics in mentoring research and practice. Furthermore, in light of the concerns raised in the literature about the hesitancy of young people in OoHC to seek support from professional staff, there seems to be an important impetus for developing new non-hierarchical language and models for mentoring. While peer and near-age mentoring offers an obvious starting point for these conversations, the lack of clarity around the parameters of these categories suggests a need for further critical theorisation and design of the purpose and outcomes of these approaches.

In answering research question three, what gaps or issues exist in the contemporary literature that might affect the impact of mentoring programs?, the review found that there is a critical gap is a typology of mentoring models, and that such a typology would facilitate better comparisons between outcome evaluation to inform policy-making and program design. In addition, critical questions were raised about mentoring design in relation to the policy context and notions of empowerment.

7. Limitations

As previously outlined, rapid reviews are intentionally designed to be concise and streamlined to meet specific time and resource constraints needed to inform policy and practice. Hamel et al., (2021) argue that rather than 'rapid', it would be better to call them 'restricted' reviews so as to avoid the emphasis on timelines and more on intentional limitations. While there is significant variation in the methodology of rapid reviews, Tricco et al. (2015) argue acceptable limitations, when transparently communicated include: 'literature search limited by date and language; study selection by one reviewer only; and data abstraction and quality appraisal conducted by one reviewer and verified by a second reviewer' (11). Our methodology produced several notable limitations including the exclusion of non-English publications, grey-literature where arguably more practice-orientated findings might be represented, as well as books and older publications where conceptualisations and theorisations of mentoring are likely to reside. While these limitations can appear to be selected in arbitrary ways, these restrictions are broadly acceptable to meet the time constraints so long as they are transparently reported (Moons, Goossens, and Thompson 2021; Tricco et al., 2015; Hamel et al., 2021).

The rapid review arguably has its origins and methodological basis in the medical sciences. The distinctions between medical and social science epistemologies and methodologies are an important consideration in review methodology design and quality assessment. The prevalence of randomised control trials and *meta*-analyses in medical fields presents a different challenge to the qualitative and contingent methods predominantly employed in the social sciences. In other words, while this review did not set out to assess the quality of the studies, the absence of standardised methods and a typology of mentoring makes this task untenable in this format. The absence of these assessments is an important limitation of this review, however, unlike in medical science contexts, this component is an unachievable goal nor inherently necessary to inform a mentoring program design. We argue further research is needed that focuses on the value of and methods for a rapid review in the applied social sciences.

8. Conclusion

The original purpose of this rapid review was to identify non-hierarchical, trauma-responsive, and culturally aware models of mentoring programs for young women in OoHC. Due to the scarcity of literature within these parameters, we broadened the scope to encompass features of mentoring programs for all young people in OoHC. A rapid review methodology was selected to work within the limitations of the funding parameters and to achieve the purpose of informing the design of a mentoring model.

The studies represented in this rapid review demonstrate the value of mentoring to supporting young people in OoHC, and the impact of program design decisions on program outcomes. However, the diverse and arguably disjointed nature of the reviewed literature suggests an absence of a unifying conceptual foundation or typology of mentoring that could support the work of practitioners. In response, this review offers a preliminary typology of mentor-mentee relationships and an analysis of broader thematic issues that provide practitioners with usable insights to inform future program design. We have highlighted two key concerns regarding the policy context and notions of 'empowerment' in the mentoring literature that represent under-explored and under-theorised issues. Such work offers an important contribution to the growing body of literature on mentoring, both in terms of knowledge translation and theorisation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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