



## Volunteers' practices in mentoring youth in distress: Volunteers as informal agents for youth

Galit Yanay-Ventura<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gila Amitay<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Human Services, The Max Stern Academy College of Emek Yezreel, Yezreel Valley, 19300, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Department of Criminology, The Max Stern Academy College of Emek Yezreel, Yezreel Valley, 19300, Israel



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### ABSTRACT

Whereas the literature deals extensively with volunteering with at-risk youth, relatively little research has addressed the practical work strategies of the volunteers themselves. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the strategies employed by youth mentoring volunteers based on qualitative research with 28 volunteers, two-thirds of whom defined themselves as former youth in distress. This focus enables us to learn about ways of coping with marginality from individuals who actually experienced it. The results point to six strategies that were reflected in the interviews: honesty and directness, listening, informal activities, refraining from judgment and containing anger and resistance, bridging between youth and caregiving entities, and cultivating a realistic sense of self-efficacy as volunteers. In essence, these strategies seek to increase access to the youth, to provide them with unconditional support, and to enable volunteers to supplement the professionals for the benefit of the youth. Though not professionals, volunteers create an agency-promoting environment to help youth escape marginalization.

### 1. Introduction

Volunteers play an important role in providing services to at-risk youth and youth in distress. These youth generally avoid seeking out welfare services due to their sense of vulnerability and their alienation from caregiving entities (Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998; Ronel, Haski-Leventhal, Ben-David, & York, 2009). Also relevant are the characteristics of modern therapeutic relations, which for example, confine the professional caregiver's contact with the beneficiary to working hours only, thus maintaining a distance between them and making it difficult for the caregivers to gain the trust of youth (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 2000). Therefore, volunteers have a considerable advantage in working with these adolescents: they forge more egalitarian, friend-like relationships which, in turn, encourage openness and trust, and they serve as role models for their beneficiaries and offer concrete assistance that focuses on the service user and that is directly related to a specific problem that has surfaced (Haski-Leventhal, Ronel, York, & Ben-David, 2008; Ronel, 2006; Ronel & Guter, 2003; Yanay-Ventura, 2016).

One of the most common services offered by volunteers to youth in distress is mentoring. Although the literature shows extensively that, for youth in distress, close and caring mentoring can inhibit antisocial behaviors, increase trust in parental (or other adult) authority, improve

social achievement and self-motivation, and decrease dropout rates from school (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002), little research has thus far been devoted to volunteers' perceptions and practical approaches (Weiler, Zarich, Haddock, Krafchick, & Zimmerman, 2014; Wilson, 2012). Other studies have highlighted the difficulties inherent in mentoring and the emotional toll it takes on volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008; Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013; Larkin, Sadler, & Mahler, 2005; Yanay & Yanay, 2008; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017), pointing to the need to learn more about the mentoring practices of volunteers in order to gain a better understanding of the methods of this unique service. This study marks an attempt to begin filling this gap by exploring the strategies employed by volunteers in mentoring youth in distress.

Youth in distress produce survival mechanisms of alienation and opposition toward caregiving entities, which are mechanisms that further increase their marginality (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). Hence, the main challenge for both the youth and the service-providers is to overcome this alienation and mistrust in a manner that enhances their ability to cope with marginalization and integrate into society (Amitay, 2018). *Agentic practices* are one way of coping with alienation, powerlessness, and marginalization among youth (Ringrose, 2013). These practices aim to turn the social service users into active agents by

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [gality@yvc.ac.il](mailto:gality@yvc.ac.il) (G. Yanay-Ventura), [gilaa@yvc.ac.il](mailto:gilaa@yvc.ac.il) (G. Amitay).

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