REPORT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG UNEMPLOYED MEN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORING AT MEN’S SHEDS
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We would like to acknowledge the Men’s Sheds and their memberships who agreed to be a part of this project and for enabling an innovative applied research study to be conducted within their spaces, and for those agreeing to be mentors. In particular, we thank Manning Men’s Shed for being the first Men’s Shed to agree to participate as well as being the Men’s Shed who hosted the graduation ceremony. We also acknowledge the young men who agreed to be mentees in this study and also the support of their families.

SUGGESTED CITATION

DISCLAIMER
This project was jointly funded by the then Disability Services Commission and Therapy Focus. This project was conducted by researchers from Western Sydney and Curtin Universities between 2017 and 2018. The content of this report represents the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding organisations. As such, no endorsement by the funders should be assumed. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this report is accurate.
PREAMBLE

During 2015, a team of researchers led by Dr Nathan J Wilson submitted an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant application to conduct a national study exploring the potential of intergenerational mentoring at Men’s Sheds to help build sustainable supports for young adults with intellectual disability. This grant application proposed a unique partnership between researchers at Western Sydney, Curtin, Murdoch and Sydney Universities, Therapy Focus in WA, The Australian Foundation for Disability in NSW, the Disability Services Commission in WA, and the Australian Men’s Sheds Association. Although receiving positive reviews, the project was not considered fundable by the ARC. After putting in such an amount of work and believing strongly in the potential of mentoring to help change lives for the better, we were all naturally disappointed with the outcome.

In late 2016, Dr Ron Chalmers, the then Director of the Disability Services Commission, authorised that although the ARC application was unsuccessful, his department believed in the project and committed the proposed cash contribution for the ARC Linkage application for the researchers to run a pilot study. Likewise, Ms Ruth Lee, CEO of Therapy Focus, committed an additional cash contribution to the pilot study.

In 2017, a research team was assembled to conduct a pilot study focused on young adult males with mild to moderate intellectual disability who were unemployed and interested in a mentoring opportunity at their local Men’s Shed. Mr Ciarain Hoey, Occupational Therapist, was employed to work as the primary field researcher under the direct guidance of Drs Ben Milbourn and Nathan J Wilson. This report summarises the outcomes from this work.

BACKGROUND

People with intellectual disability (ID) often experience multiple disadvantages in education, work, health, community and social participation. The seeds of this lifelong disadvantage are often sown during the transition to adulthood. Many young people with ID experience a sub-optimal transition due to limited access to community and employment networks, as well as a lack of sustainable supports and relationships outside the family. International research about young people without a disability reveals that formal mentors can have important positive influences on this transition, for example in wellbeing and employment. Our feasibility research indicates that intergenerational mentoring holds promise for mentors to influence the social and economic trajectories of young adults with ID during this transition (Wilson et al., 2018). Men’s Sheds are ideally situated to support young adults with ID due to their unique activity-based mentoring context, as well as the potential to develop and expand social, employment and community networks (Cordier et al., 2016). Men’s Sheds are the fastest growing grassroots community organisation in Australia, with nearly 95% of the more than 1,000 sheds already offering formal mentoring programs; thus, offering a socially inclusive approach. The National Disability Insurance Scheme has a clear emphasis on supporting people with disability to access mainstream services and developing cost-effective community-based approaches that fosters social and economic participation are important.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The project had the following objectives:

1. To design and implement an intergenerational mentoring program at Men’s Sheds;
2. To evaluate the intergenerational mentoring program’s impact on young adults with ID with respect to: (a) quality of life, (b) wellbeing, (c) loneliness, and (d) workplace supports;
3. To describe the influence that mentoring has on older male mentors with respect to: (a) generativity and (b) wellbeing; and
4. To describe the intervention components of the mentoring program to better enable future replication.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research project was approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee on the 2nd March, 2017 (Project ID: HRE2017-0078). No adverse events were reported.
THE MENTEES

The mentees were 18 young males with mild to moderate intellectual disability living in Perth, Western Australia. The average age of the mentees was 19.6 years and 17 of the 18 mentees lived with their family. The majority of the mentees were unemployed, except for two who had some part-time work. In addition to having intellectual disability, screening of the mentees showed that three reported having depressive symptoms and 12 reported having anxiety symptoms. People with intellectual disability have greater rates of mental health issues than people without intellectual disability, particularly during the transition to adulthood (Cvejic & Trollor, 2018). On average, most of the mentees needed limited support with personal care and supervision; however, five needed regular support each day. Only one mentee had serious behaviour problems that were supported by a paid support worker while he was at the Men’s Shed. The majority of the mentees (approximately 40%) used public transport or were driven by a parent or support worker (approximately 10%) to get to the Men’s Shed.

THE MENTORS

The mentors were older male members of the Men’s Sheds and each mentee had at least 1 mentor. In total, there were 16 mentors and some of the mentors had more than one mentee. The median age of the mentors was 74 years and all but one were retired. Five of the mentors had a family member with intellectual disability and six mentors had some previous experience being a mentor.

The Men’s Sheds who participated in the mentoring program were all from Perth, Western Australia. A total of 7 Men’s Sheds agreed to be part of the program. We also had in principle support from other Men’s Sheds around Perth, however, as we did not recruit any mentees from these geographical areas, they were not included.

The participating Men’s Sheds were: Manning, Yanchep, Victoria Park, Fremantle, Mundaring, Stirling, and Joondalup.

THE SHEDS
THE SIX-MONTH MENTORING PROGRAM

DEDICATED OCCUPATION THERAPIST SUPPORT

Vital to the success of the program was having a dedicated occupational therapist – Mr Ciarain Hoey – to work with the mentees. Train the mentors and support the mentor-mentee dyad over the 6 months. Occupational therapists bring a skill-set and nuanced understanding of the relationship and synergies between person, occupation and environment. Occupational therapists use the skills of activity analysis and grading and adaptation to modify the activity including instructions, prompts to enable successful completion of the activity. An example of this type of support included teaching some mentees new public transport routes to the Men’s Shed where each step in the journey was broken down into a series of smaller tasks. First the mentee and the occupational therapist travelled the new route together, and then the occupational therapist gradually reduced their support until the mentee was able to travel the new route independently.

THE SIX-MONTH PROGRAM

Mentees were supported to contact the research team by either a family member of paid support worker. After determining that they were suitable for the program, we approached their local Men’s Shed to see if firstly the shed members were interested in participating in the program, and then secondly if there were any members who wanted to volunteer to be a mentor. The approach to mentoring was that the research team would train and support the mentors in how to support and communicate with people with intellectual disability, but that the mentors and the mentees would decide what project they worked on. Mentors attended a disability awareness training session led by the occupational therapist. Following the training, the occupational therapist provided 1:1 graded support to the mentor-mentee dyad that was faded after about a 6-week period. The goal was that the mentors would focus on ways of transferring their life experience and knowledge to the mentees to help increase their chances of getting a job in the future. The great advantage about partnering with Men’s Sheds is that they offer a work-like context for mentees, where there are many types of activities on offer that all have teachable tasks and multiple social opportunities to practice and increase confidence in communicating with others. The types of activities included woodworking, metal work, paving, music, painting, sewing, gardening, hydroponics and shed maintenance. In addition to being able to participate in a morning or afternoon tea, most sheds have various BBQs and social event where the mentees also had opportunities to socialise with all members of the Men’s Shed.

MENTEE OUTCOMES FROM THE PROGRAM

WE USED A RANGE OF STANDARDISED MEASURES TO SEE IF THERE WERE CHANGES TO MENTES’ LEVEL OF QUALITY OF LIFE, LONELINESS, WELLBEING AND WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENT.

After the 6-month program, there was no statistically significant change to mentees’ mental health, productivity, intimacy, safety or emotion-related quality of life. There was, however, a significant increase in mentees sense of community-related quality of life which is about doing activities in the community and having someone to talk to for advice and help. There was also no statistically significant change to mentees’ sense of loneliness, social satisfaction, wellbeing or workplace adjustment.

MENTORS

WE USED A RANGE OF STANDARDISED MEASURES TO SEE IF THERE WERE CHANGES TO MENTORS’ SENSE OF GENERATIVITY OR HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE. OVER THE DURATION OF THE PROJECT, MENTORS’ SENSE OF GENERATIVITY DID NOT CHANGE SIGNIFICANTLY, WHICH WE THINK WAS BECAUSE THE MENTORS STARTED OFF WITH A STRONG SENSE OF GENERATIVITY AND SO THERE WAS NOT MUCH OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE. MENTORS’ PHYSICAL HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE DID NOT CHANGE OVER THE COURSE OF THE PROJECT AND THIS WAS TO BE EXPECTED. HOWEVER, MENTORS’ MENTAL HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE DID INCREASE SIGNIFICANTLY, SUGGESTING THAT MENTORS DERIVED SOME EMOTIONAL BENEFITS FROM BEING A MENTOR.

Left, occupational therapist, Mr Ciarain Hoey, provided specialised support.
HOW MENTORING SUPPORTED THE JOURNEY TOWARD INDEPENDENT PARTICIPATION

Through this project, we were able to determine that mentees benefited in multiple ways. The combination of training and graded support to the mentors from the occupational therapist was a vital part of the program’s success. Secondly, the direct 1:1 support from the mentors, together with positive reinforcement, praise and encouragement, was integral to the mentees having the confidence to gradually join in and benefit from the program. The figure below illustrates the steps involved in supporting the progress of the mentee throughout the program.

Application of behaviour change techniques such as positive reinforcement, verbal praise and encouragement

- **Outcomes to be addressed such as developing workplace adjustment, psychological wellbeing, social participation and self-belief**
- **Graded training and support provided to mentor-mentee dyad over time**

**Mentee participation was goal-driven**

**Facilitating task-specific feedback and monitoring**

**Repetition of socially appropriate behaviour and task related skills**

**Support to participate in task and social activities**

**Providing, then fading, behavioural prompts and cues**

**Progressing towards independent participation**
The contribution of Therapy Focus was not only support with recruitment of mentees, but also to fund the filming and production of three video-based case stories.

These video stories can be viewed for free via YouTube by using the following links:

**Video 1**
Fostering social inclusion at the Men’s Shed
[youtu.be/2TQ1I07f93M](https://youtu.be/2TQ1I07f93M)

**Video 2**
Supporting young men with confidence and skills
[youtu.be/CAeuvCpq9n4](https://youtu.be/CAeuvCpq9n4)

**Video 3**
Summary about the Men’s Shed mentoring program
[youtu.be/RVu35Z2c0c4](https://youtu.be/RVu35Z2c0c4)

At the end of the program, Manning Men’s Shed hosted a graduation ceremony and BBQ at the Manning Senior Citizen’s Centre. The mentees were awarded their graduation certificates by Disability Services Minister, the Hon. Stephen Noel Dawson. The graduation ceremony was also attended by City of South Perth Mayor Sue Doherty, WA Men’s Shed Association Executive Officer Gary Bryant, Federal Member for Swan Steve Irons, South Perth MLA John McGrath, South Metropolitan MLC Kate Doust, mentees, mentors, and friends and family. Right is a picture from the graduation ceremony with six of the mentees as well as Dr Ben Milbourne (second from the left) and Mr Ciaran Hoy (third from the right at back).

The next stage of our research is to secure research funding to conduct a national randomised controlled trial. This will give us the evidence that is needed to build the evidence base about intergenerational mentoring at Men’s Sheds.

Not all Men’s Sheds will want to become involved in mentoring programs, but where they do, such programs can enhance work skills for unemployed males with intellectual disability that will increase their chances of getting a job in the future.

Any intergenerational mentoring program at a Men’s Shed that involves people with intellectual disability should always be supported by having mentors with strong interpersonal skills, provide focused mentor training, adopt approaches that focus on shared problem solving, rather than adopt a traditional teacher-student dyad approach. Importantly, the mentoring program should have dedicated time for social interaction between all members of the shed and the mentees, choose achievable tasks and projects, and have a ceremony to celebrate achievements (Ranja et al., 2016).
REFERENCES


