

How an intervention project contributes to social inclusion of adolescents and young people of foreign origin



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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of the impact study of the Nightingale Project, a social mentoring project, whose aim is to support the welcoming and social inclusion processes of adolescent students of foreign origin who recently arrived in Catalonia and who are currently enrolled in the country's schools. The more than one hundred mentoring pairs (mentor and mentee) that took part in the intervention project were administered a questionnaire ($N = 58$). This same questionnaire was also given to a group of adolescents with the same profile but who did not participate in the project ($N = 128$) and who were treated as a control group.

After six months of intervention (which corresponds to the duration of the Nightingale Project), results show that students who participate in mentoring learn the language faster, create broader and more diverse networks of friends in school, develop higher educational aspirations and expectations, are better acquainted with the reception context (municipality they live in), and improve standards of self-confidence and self-esteem, among other characteristics. The research also demonstrates that mentoring aimed at adolescents, as is the case of the Nightingale Project, plays a key role in avoiding development of an oppositional identity and, conversely, helps facilitate a process of resilience in adolescents in the new context of reception.

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1. Introduction

There are many areas of study on social mentoring in relation to the adolescent and young population. In this article we present the results of a study carried out with the objective of determining the impact of the Nightingale Project, especially among adolescent mentees between ages 10 and 16.

The Nightingale Project is part of the European-wide Nightingale Mentoring Network, which originated at the University of Malmö, Sweden. Since 1997 this project has been implemented in twenty European universities in central and northern Europe. The results of this study, although providing the first quantitative data collected on an international scale, also complement the partial evaluations of a qualitative nature confined primarily to Swedish territory (i.e. Sild-Lönroth, 2007 and Backe-Hansen, Seeberg, Solberg, Bakketeig, & Patras, 2011).

In this article we show, first, the main contributions of the scientific literature related to the benefits of mentoring programs on young people and then go on to highlight the contribution of the Nightingale Project. It should be noted that a large proportion of the most recognized scientific contributions on mentoring have focused on the American context, but given that American mentoring targeted at adolescents and the mentoring of the Nightingale Project have

many common objectives, we now have the opportunity to make an interesting and unprecedented comparison between different national contexts.

2. Review of the literature

In the scientific literature we find a growing volume of studies focused on analyzing mentoring relationships. Among these, some focus their interest on mentoring applied to the professional field of health and medicine, others on mentoring applied to companies, while still other studies are mainly interested in mentoring of a more social nature addressed to young people at risk of social exclusion. In recent years, studies targeting this group have convincingly demonstrated that while mentoring provides very important benefits to mentees and to society as a whole, it also benefits the public treasury, to the effect that these are policies, programs and actions with a relatively low cost when compared to traditional social intervention policies (Roberts, Liabo, Lucas, DuBois, & Sheldon, 2004).

The vast majority of studies surrounding social mentoring coincide in emphasizing that mentoring brings improvements in academic achievement as well as contributes to the balanced emotional development of mentees. Specifically, they show how mentoring impacts on the improvement of mentees' academic results, reduces absenteeism, increases educational expectations and reduces rates of disruptive and problematic behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption, and use of violence or crime (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, & Lawrence,

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2012; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Herrera, Kauh, Cooney, Grossman, & McMaken, 2008; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Rhodes, 2002; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). In the case of studies whose objective is social mentoring with a strong ethnic component, mentoring has been shown to be very effective in breaking down stereotypes and prejudices toward weaker and often vulnerable groups (in this regard, we recommend the research of Popova-Koskarova (2010) focused on the Roma population).

2.1. Adolescents at risk, mentoring and academic success

One of the main factors of social inclusion in today's information society is academic success. Several studies have indicated that mentoring can help foster this by two means: mentoring programs that operate within the framework of the school – in extracurricular activities, for example – or through actions that deliberately intervene outside of school. Herrera et al. (2011) emphasize that students who have trouble learning and who live in vulnerable situations can easily enter into processes of demotivation and disaffection toward school. These young people easily become accustomed to school failure, which leads to conflict behavior both in and out of school. The aforementioned authors emphasize that social mentoring programs, either within or outside the school context, if well planned and systematized, often help to reverse this situation.

Along the same lines, DuBois et al. (2002) and Larose and Tarabulsy (2005), through their research, contribute evidence that social mentoring for adolescents and young people in situations of risk, although not operating in the school framework, can help improve students' behavior, improve their relationship with school and is often a factual element in achieving better academic results. These changes usually occur because, indirectly, mentoring promotes assertive and resilient attitudes and identities in these young people.

The need to implement social mentoring projects among adolescent and young immigrants is an indisputable fact in Catalonia and in other international settings. Martín, Larena, and Mondéjar (2012) show how the school enrollment rate of immigrant students goes from 100% in compulsory education to only 19% in post-compulsory education and 3.3% in university education. The situation of school failure, coupled with low indices of post-compulsory and university education, places the foreign population in a situation of social vulnerability.

2.2. Importance of the role of the mentor and the program structure

In recent years, consensus has emerged among the scientific community that mentoring programs, per se, do not necessarily promote the social inclusion of individuals in at-risk situations. Roberts et al. (2004), for example, stress that mentoring programs, to be effective, must have quality designs and include pro-social elements for young people. Otherwise, despite the good intentions of the program, it may achieve the very opposite of what was intended.

Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, and Povinelli (2002) state that there are programs that, in reality, are not effective for young people because, in those cases, the mentors do not show the capacity to generate emotional ties with their mentees. In this regard, the authors argue that an inefficient mentor may even transmit negative influences to young people. They highlight a series of characteristics that may influence the process and must be taken into account. Characteristics such as the socio-demographic profile of the persons involved, the mentor's capacity and skills for providing support, the ability of the mentor to make the young person trust them, the possibility of maintaining regular contact between mentors and mentees, the possibility of establishing different types of meetings, and the capacity to build close relationships between mentor and mentee are considered crucially important elements.

DuBois et al. (2002), based on their study of the widely known program, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, consider as key elements for a program's success: (a) the design features and execution of the program, (b) the characteristics of the participating young people, (c) the qualities that occur between mentor and mentee and (d) the capacity to scientifically evaluate the results obtained.

3. Methodology

To verify the impact of the Nightingale Project, a primarily quantitative study was designed whose basic instrument was a questionnaire, administered at two different times, in order to establish a contrast.

The impact study focused on analyzing the contributions the Nightingale Project made, predominantly to adolescents between ten and sixteen years of age, throughout one edition: specifically the academic year 2012–2013. During this school year the same questionnaire was given twice to all the pairs participating in the Nightingale Project, once at the beginning of the project (1st round) and again toward the end (2nd round). A total of 88 questionnaires were given out, of which, counting both rounds, 56 were returned. These young people, who were labeled group of participants (treatment group), had the following characteristics: 19% were in primary school and the remaining 81% were enrolled in compulsory secondary education; 43% came from the African continent, 30.7% from Central and South America, 16.8% from Asia and the remaining 10% from Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, the same procedure was followed with 128 boys and girls who did not participate in the Nightingale Project but who shared the same school and the same socio-economic and ethnic profile as the mentees in a single round. In this group of young people, which was used as the control group, 21% were in primary school and 79% in compulsory secondary education; 45% came from the African continent, 28% from Central and South America, 19% from Asia and the remaining 8% from Eastern Europe.

It should be noted that the survey given to both the group of participants and the control group was pre-tested through a pilot test (given to 20 students from different nationalities). This test, while it showed us that the survey was generally understood by recipients, forced us to change some questions – especially referring to questions that were interested in ascertaining self-esteem – because the approach of the question generated a certain degree of confusion.

The surveys given to students in the group of participants were administered by the respective mentors, who underwent a prior training session conducted by members of the research group. In addition, the mentors responsible for this task had technical support at their disposal at all times to clear up any questions. The surveys addressed to the control group were administered by their teachers and, as in the previous case, they also had technical support available (member of the research group). It must be noted that, regarding both the mentors and teachers charged with administering the survey, this resource was hardly used (only on three occasions), which attests to the high reliability of the instrument. There are, however, other elements that lead us to a positive judgment of the instrument: the high percentage of questions answered in a plausible way in the returned questionnaires (estimated percentage of around 90% of the questions).

For analysis of the data, we took into account the unit of measure *net effects*, more specifically the net effect of Cohen (1988), which allows us to measure the impact of mentoring by comparing the results of the treatment group and the control group. In the representation of the data we can observe two groups, referred to as *Net effects mentees*, which corresponds to the mean difference between groups, and the *Net effects of the extreme group*, which is the differential of the upper quartile group of mentees (the 25% of mentees in which the program had the greatest impact), those upon whom mentoring had the most effect.

3.1. The Nightingale Project

The Nightingale Project is a mentoring project between university students and students between 10 and 16 years of age of foreign origin from primary and secondary schools in Catalonia, and is currently being carried out in the provinces of Girona and Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). The university students receive the name mentors, and the primary and secondary school students, the principal object of the program, are called mentees.

The whole of the Nightingale Project, which has already completed nine editions, has been articulated around two branches in constant dialog. On one hand, voluntary action by the university students from the University of Girona, Pompeu Fabra University, the Polytechnic University of Catalonia and the University of Barcelona and, on the other, the establishment of a line of research on mentoring encompasses both the national and international spheres. The entities that are carrying this out are the University of Girona, in the province of Girona, and the Fundació Servei Solidari [Solidarity Service Foundation] in Barcelona.

The strategic objectives of the project are (a) to promote the cultural, social and linguistic inclusion of students of foreign origin (mentees), (b) to actively collaborate on strategies for the academic success of mentees, (c) to increase the training and educational expectations of mentees, (d) to provide training in the area of cultural diversity to participating university students (mentors), (e) to increase awareness of cultural diversity in the university community and (f) to provide society with a distinguished and renowned project that actively works for social equality, cohesion and inclusion.

University students who choose to take part in the Nightingale Project must go through a series of requirements and filters; once they have completed registration using the form on the website, they will be asked (via email) to respond to a questionnaire – in the case of the University of Girona – or will be interviewed personally, in the case of the Solidarity Service Foundation. Both processes are key for the selection of the most appropriate mentors for carrying out the project with full guarantees.

Once selected, the university students must undergo preparation to perfect their performance of mentoring tasks. To this end they participate in a compacted and intensive training course. In these training sessions they work on areas including the mentoring task, cultural diversity, interculturality and social integration, immigration and adolescence, the experience of mentors from previous years, the characteristics of immigration in the territory and, lastly, the informal educational, cultural and recreational resources that exist in the places where mentoring will be implemented.

Mentoring is objectified in three-hour weekly meetings over a period of nine months (September to May). Mentors prepare activities to do with their mentees that are designed to work toward the goals of the project.

4. Results

Below we present the main results from our analysis of data from the fieldwork. They are structured according to the principal areas analyzed: school inclusion, linguistic inclusion, socio-cultural inclusion, educational and occupational aspirations and expectations, and emotional development. These results are represented in two summary graphs (Fig. 1 – on the following page – and Fig. 2), which detail the net effects in the group of mentees compared with the control group.

4.1. School inclusion

In the school sphere, the results show with absolute clarity that the mentored students who participated in the project improved their social relationships, increasing their interaction with classmates. The fact that mentoring reinforces their self-confidence, coupled with the

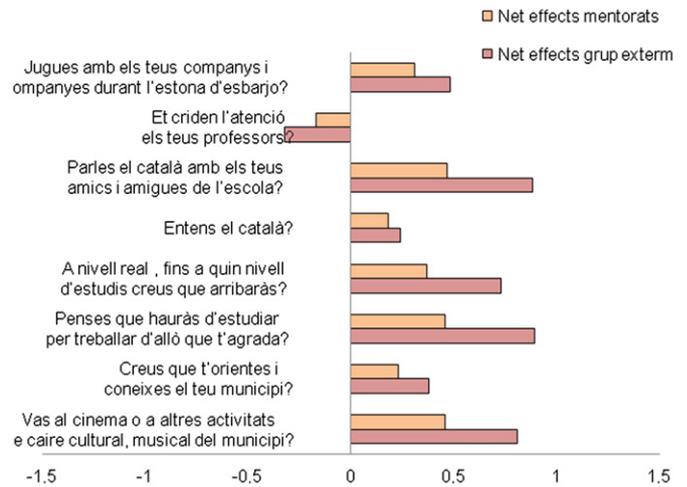


Fig. 1. Net effects in relation to items with school, the language and knowledge of the context of reception.

social use of the Catalan language, helps mentees develop and consolidate relationships with other classmates and not only with students from their own group (positive net effect of $d = 0.3$). The improvement of this situation, promoted by the indirect support of mentors, makes it possible for both mentees and the rest of their classmates to have more intercultural relationships and interactions with persons from diverse cultures.

Also in the school context, the improvement in behavior of the mentored students is notable in comparison with the control group. When asked if their teachers had *reprimanded them lately in class*, the group of mentees showed a lower rate compared to the control group. We can also see how, in general terms, the treatment group shows a greater tendency to have more assertive attitudes and behaviors toward teachers and school.

4.2. Linguistic inclusion

The results indicate, in general, an intermediate level of comprehension of the Catalan language, both among mentees and students from the control group. Still, Fig. 1 shows that the boys and girls from the treatment group show considerable gains in their knowledge of Catalan, compared with those who are part of the control group. We can also perceive that mentees make greater social use of Catalan, that is to say, they speak more in Catalan with their school friends, possibly due to the self-confidence acquired through their participation in the Nightingale Project. This results in mentees having a more varied and intercultural network of friends, which in turn intensifies the process

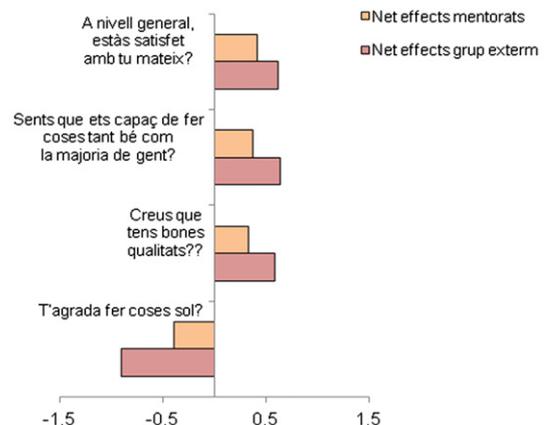


Fig. 2. Net effects of the project on mentees related to their emotional development.

of social inclusion. In this case the positive net effect is one of the highest in the graph ($d = 0.5$ on average and $d = 9$ in the case of the extreme group).

4.3. Socio-cultural inclusion

Another aspect we analyzed revolves around mentees' knowledge of their surroundings, in order to determine whether the Nightingale Project helps them get to know their environment. Thus, we link socio-cultural inclusion to the type of relationship the adolescents have with their space and to their attendance at cultural activities taking place in their city. In this case we want to analyze the extent to which our subjects are familiar with their surroundings, the neighborhood or the city they reside in. When they were asked if *they think they know their town well and how to get around it*, we can observe, as shown in Fig. 1, how, once again, the effects of mentoring on the young people in the treatment group lead to a higher frequency of knowledge, in comparison with those who make up the control group.

Another specific aspect that we analyzed is our subjects' habits with regard to cultural activities. To this effect, they were asked about their use of nearby cultural facilities (library, museums, etc.). In relation to participation in activities of a cultural nature, students in the treatment group show a higher rate compared to students in the control group. This difference may be due, in part, to the types of meetings that take place during mentoring. Many of the main activities that mentors and mentees do together are cultural in nature, including, for instance, going to the cinema or theater, to museums, or attending various kinds of shows.

4.4. Educational aspirations and expectations

To analyze this block, the adolescents were asked what academic objective they sought to reach, whether they really saw themselves as capable of achieving this, and the degree of effort they were willing to make to achieve their objectives.

In the analysis of the results we were able to observe that the level of academic aspirations is high in all of these boys and girls, both from the treatment group and the control group. This indicates that we are dealing with a group of students of foreign origin who desire to achieve an intermediate or high level of studies (vocational training, high school diploma, university). However, when talking about the real possibilities for reaching these levels, the treatment group presents higher expectations compared to the control group (Fig. 1). This may result from the specific characteristics of the project. In this case, the mentor is a university student who, due to their condition as such, may end up generating in the mentee the desire to achieve a higher academic level, a more realistic image of what is required, and greater self-confidence to attain it. This influence, which is a referent for the mentee, may come about because throughout the mentoring period different aspects related to the university are discussed, and universities may even be visited. The relationship between mentees and the university is also present in the project through events such as parties and celebrations, which help these young people to become familiar with the university.

Regarding the level of effort that mentees were willing to make to achieve their academic and occupational expectations, we observed significant differences between the treatment and control groups. In order to measure this, participants responded to the question: "Do you think you will have to study in order to work at what you like?" In Fig. 1 we can see that the mentees are clearer and more conscious about the effort they will have to make to be able to work at what they like, which in the majority of cases are qualified occupations.

4.5. Relationships and emotional development

In this subsection we analyze specific issues that relate to the field of emotional relationships, such as the degrees of self-esteem, self-

confidence, security and autonomy developed by mentees, compared to non-mentees, thanks to their participation in the Nightingale Project (Fig. 2).

First, the results related to the level of autonomy are highlighted. We can observe that the young people in the treatment group have less desire to do things alone. Apparently, this data could be interpreted as a response to a lesser degree of autonomy. However, this contradiction can be explained by the fact that the mentees have discovered the benefits and pleasure of doing activities together, which result in less willingness to do things alone.

In relation to the degree of self-esteem, the respondents were asked if they believed they had good qualities. Although all of the students had a high degree of self-esteem, the mentees showed, over the course of the project, a significant increase compared to members of the control group.

Finally, and also related to emotional development, the extracted data shows the positive contribution of mentoring on issues such as perception of one's capacities and degree of personal satisfaction. In answer to the questions "Do you feel you are able to do things as well as most people?" and "In general, are you satisfied with yourself?" we found that the boys and girls in the treatment group show greater capacity and personal satisfaction than their counterparts in the control group.

5. Conclusions

This article, in the opinion of the research team, stands out in two respects. First, the typology of the program being analyzed: a program that addresses social, cultural and linguistic inclusion of adolescents of foreign origin, and in which mentors are university students; and second, because this is a quantitative study that evaluates a mentoring program that, approached in this way, is rare in the European context.

The results of the study provide significant evidence regarding the benefits and improvements stemming from the social mentoring of participating adolescents, who improved their linguistic competence and their social and relational networks, and are better able to measure the effort they have to make to achieve their educational and occupational goals. The students who were part of the control group, thanks to the action of their school and environment, also experienced a positive evolution, but when compared to the treatment group, the study demonstrates that this improvement is less pronounced than that shown by the students who participated in mentoring.

Why does the Nightingale Project have this transformative effect? Indeed, this issue was not examined in this research and, therefore, we are unable to present authoritative results. Yet, given the importance of the subject, we can make note of some hypotheses to be dealt with in subsequent research that, if it can be conducted, will be very important in terms of developing criteria to help make decisions on how to design successful mentoring programs. The transformative effect of the Nightingale Project probably lies in the simplicity of its objectives and the relatively complex organization required for carrying it out.

The Nightingale Project has a very clear principle: to promote social, cultural and linguistic inclusion of young people of foreign origin through the action of volunteer university students who, properly trained and with a strong commitment, dedicate part of their time to this task. The organization of the Nightingale Project is based on a plural network of partners where each individual freely assumes the responsibility and commitment they wish to take on in the project, with the understanding that they will adhere to that to which they have committed.

It also remains to be seen whether the improvements that mentees experienced during the mentoring exercise will be lasting and profitable. Put differently: are the objective improvements in social, cultural and linguistic inclusion circumstantial improvements and, therefore, closely tied to the project experience, or will they have an impact on the future? Will these improvements be capitalized on and revalued

or, conversely, are they contingent on devaluation that, in turn, is conditioned by the structural conditions of life that mentees will be subject to in the coming years? In this sense, we believe that in-depth studies are required to measure the mid- and long-term impact on young mentees, in order to visualize the longitudinal effects of mentoring programs such as the Nightingale Project.

6. Scientific discussion and consequences of this study

We do not want to finish this article without addressing two important issues: first, the question of examining some of the conclusions we have drawn in this study in function of others that were identified in research that preceded us and, second, we believe that it is necessary to consider the consequences that the contributions presented here may have in the practical and political spheres.

Regarding the first question, we believe that there are three types of conclusions that are worth highlighting: a) those which, in line with what previous research has said, corroborate certain findings; b) those that clarify or contribute additional information to explanations provided by the scientific community; and c) those that, in all modesty, are innovative contributions – in part due to the specific nature of the objectives of the project that we have analyzed here.

A substantial part of the conclusions in this article affirm what other researchers have already said. The mentees involved in the Nightingale Project, as occurred with mentees analyzed by Deutsch et al. (2012), Herrera et al. (2011) and DuBois et al. (2002), experienced a series of positive changes that help them fit in better with the dynamics of school. This more harmonious situation has various consequences: from improved social relationships with others to improved behavior in the classroom and improved attitudes toward the institution as a whole and teachers in particular. We would say, then, that there is a high degree of coincidence in much research regarding the change of position, role and attitude of the mentee toward school; changes that help mentees to enjoy a smoother and more successful educational trajectory. This would not be too relevant if it weren't for the fact that these coincidences occur between studies that analyze different mentoring projects that, moreover, were conducted in plural cultural universes and different geographic areas.

As a conclusion that introduces nuances to what has been said in research conducted prior to ours, it must be said that when in the Nightingale Project we compared the educational aspirations of the treatment group to those of the control group, we found them to be very much alike. The educational bars set by each group are, in global terms, very similar. However, mentees who participated in Nightingale made a more accurate calculation when assessing the effort they must make and the aptitudes they must develop to achieve the desired educational levels. It is in this sense that we claim that the mentoring experience contributes important elements to the student to accurately measure the means they require. This fact has a rather logical explanation: mentees speak with their mentors about the university and the effort they had to make to get there, and about the filters – both visible and invisible – that they found along their educational route, etc. In this sense, therefore, it is expected that they would have more information.

We believe that we make an innovative contribution when addressing the subject of linguistic inclusion and, although perhaps not as much, that of socio-cultural integration (both particular aspects of this project and, in a large part, central elements for the cohesion of Catalan society). To the analysis of these questions we introduce a certain degree of innovation because in previous research they were either left unstudied or, as is the case with socio-cultural integration, were studied under different parameters. The fact is that the mentored students participating in the Nightingale Project acquired linguistic competences in the Catalan language superior to those of students in the control group. This effect, explained very well by theorists working on second language acquisition among foreign populations, has inexorably to do with the climate of trust established between mentor

and mentee, as well as the informal setting in which language learning occurs.

Another relatively innovative contribution is when we explain the elements to be taken into account when seeking greater effectiveness of mentoring programs. Studies by Parra et al. (2002) and DuBois et al. (2002) emphasize, among others, the need to choose a suitable profile of participants, the capacity of the mentor to create positive affective bonds and make the mentee view them as someone they can trust, the ability to meet regularly and periodically, the capacity to create close relationships, etc. In the study presented here, however, we add another that has something to do with the meaning and the direction of the activities carried out by mentor and mentee: when these activities focus on heartfelt, relevant and meaningful experiences; and when these are shared – as far as they can be shared – between mentor and mentee, their family and the political leadership of the project, their transformative power is undoubtedly greater.

In finishing, we briefly address some of the possible consequences of this study in both the practical and policy spheres.

We believe that mentoring studies in general, and this one in particular, give high value and meaning to the hundreds of mentoring projects that are being carried out around the world. Being a mentor is meaningful, not only because you give part of your private time – which already says a lot in the society we live in – but also because, in a silent and often anonymous way, the mentor collaborates in a process of individual and social transformation focused on social cohesion. For mentoring practices to be effective, however, good personal intentions are not enough; analysis and planning tools are also required to ensure project implementation and subsequent evaluation.

The results of this research and of research that preceded us contribute compelling arguments for political and governmental authorities around the world to lend their support to mentoring projects. The reasons are obvious and were explained in part by Roberts et al. (2004). But we would also add these: a great number of social mentoring projects are projects of social responsibility where the associative, neighborhood and community fabric plays an important role; the majority of social mentoring projects allow for the design of policies of inclusion, cohesion and equity based on the necessity of a very specific territory or community (thus favoring local solutions); mentoring programs recognize the difference, autonomy and uniqueness of their practices; and mentoring programs are well aware that the public sector is not limited to that which is institutional. Most mentoring projects, when compared with standardized policies specific to the Welfare State (questioned and partly dismantled in much of Europe), empower individuals rather than accommodate them.

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