Received for publication: 13.01.2015. Preliminary paper

UDK: 364

GENDER ASPECTS IN MENTORING CHILDREN - THE MENTORS' PERSPECTIVE[1]

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SUMMARY

The goal of this paper is to examine the mentors' perspective on, and their experiences of mentoring children, with regard to the child's gender. Qualitative methodology was used in the process of collecting and processing data. The data were acquired by means of focus groups and interviews, and have been processed utilizing the thematic analysis method. The participants in this project were male and female mentors taking part in the Mentors in Community program, which is part of activities of the Blue Phone Helpline for Youths. Three groups of mentors participated in the focus groups: male mentors mentoring boys, female mentors mentoring girls, and female mentors mentoring boys. The results of this study show that mentors consider mentoring as a positive worthwhile activity, and that they have positive attitudes towards the program. It appears that child's gender has an important role when it comes to the mentor-mentee relationship. The influence of gender is not direct, however, but rather works in combination with other characteristics of the child, age in particular.

Keywords*: mentoring children, gender, mentors' perspective, qualitative research*

1 This article is based in the research conducted as part of the primary author's B.A. thesis, defended at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences in 2011.

THE POTENTIAL OF MENTORING IN THE PROCESS OF GROWING UP

The contemporary processes that children go through while growing up and developing is characterized by numerous challenges posed by their surroundings, and by a need to develop new approaches and societal interventions that would assist them in these processes and situations. In these "post-Convention"[2] times, the child is considered an active stakeholder in his/her development, an actor that is capable of taking part in his/her own environment, and able to take responsibility for his/her actions (Markovinović, 2010). Thus the educational paradigm has changed to focus more on the responsibility of the child than on the child's obedience (Pećnik, 2008). The society as a whole has been more and more focused on the needs and the rights of children, which is reflected in the development of state institutions that are aimed primarily at protecting the rights of children. These include the Ombudsman for children, the formalization of national and local policies concerning children (e.g. the National Strategy for Rights of Children in Republic of Croatia 2014-2020), along with the initiatives that have stemmed from the civil society (e.g. the "Towns and districts – friends of children" initiative of the Union of Societies "Our children", see more at http://www.savez-dnd.hr/en/). On the other hand, however, the modern life also brings about less availability of adults for their children, as a result of the speeding up of the pace of life, and the changes in social structure of the family and of the neighbourhood. Thus we see an increasing number of children growing up in single-parent families (Zrinščak and Puljiz, 2002). Nowadays, children are facing the unfortunate prospect of growing up "in isolation" from high-quality interactions with caring adults. It is precisely in this context that we discuss mentoring, and mentoring programmes aimed at children in particular, as one of the potential solutions of this problem of isolated growth and development of a child.

Looking into the numerous existing definitions of mentoring allows us to locate the overlapping elements that provide the best overview of that the concept means (Jeđud and Ustić, 2009):

- the mentoring relationship (one on one), which includes guidance and support, and is characterized by a certain degree of trust and emotional closeness between the mentor and the mentee
- a mentor is a person who is more experienced, more competent in an area or specific skill than the mentee is; when it comes to child mentoring, this person is most commonly[3] older than the mentee.

2 We are referring to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

3 There are numerous forms of mentoring, one of which is peer mentoring, which shows that it is not necessary for the mentor to be older than the mentee. However, when it comes to mentoring programmes for children, the

- mentoring presumes a continuity, i.e. regular socializing over a longer period of time.

Žižak (2003) differentiates natural (informal) and organized (formal) mentoring. Informal mentoring includes a natural support within the framework of familial relationship, or within a circle of friends, in an already existing social network, and is expressed by means of friendship, collegiality, instruction, practice of skills, and advising. These natural mentors are important persons in a child's every-day life (Jeđud and Ustić, 2009). In the context of natural mentoring, the relationship is embedded in the child's existing social network and it fulfils a specific strengthening role that straddles the roles of parent and friend (Goldner and Mayseless, 2009). Organized (formal) mentoring is practised through structured mentoring programmes where the mentor and the mentee are carefully selected and brought together through formal procedures (Jeđud and Ustić, 2009). The task of the formal mentor is to solidify the child's self-confidence, to support the child's personal development, and to compensate for a lack of natural mentors in the child's life (Goldner and Mayseless, 2009).

The core element of mentoring is the mentor-mentee relationship which falls into the category of naturally supportive relationships, which means that the mentor simultaneously uses the contents of friendly and familial relationships, with occasional inclusion of professional elements with the aim of building a relationship with the child (Žižak, 2003). Research has shown that the effective mentoring relationships are voluntary and based on mutual respect and empathy. Furthermore, they are able to have an impact on the occurrence of positive outcomes in three developmental processes: socio-emotional, cognitive, and the development of identity (Rhodes and DuBois, 2008). Rhodes et al. (2006, in Goldner and Mayseless 2009) note the importance of certain characteristics of the mentoring relationship for the success of the mentoring process as a whole. First, they state that the mentors can affect change in the child's relationship to themselves, and to others, by engaging with them in caring and supportive ways. Next, they can enable direct and indirect learning through various activities and in that way influence the child's cognitive development and help them improve both their academic achievement and their motivation for school work. As models for identification and advocates for the children, mentors may affect a positive development of the child's identity. In this context we refer to the work done in the US by Pedersen et al. (2009), who show that the children that have been mentored have shown a series of positive outcomes, such as improved academic performance, greater self-confidence, better interpersonal relationships, and a higher level of pro-social behaviour.

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mentors are most often adults.

The evaluation of the most famous mentoring programme in the US (Big Brothers Big Sisters) has shown that, compared to the children that have not been mentored, the children in the programme were less likely to drop out of school, to experiment with substance abuse, to engage in physical violence. They were also displaying higher levels of performance in school, and have had better relationships with parents and peers (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 1995).

The research conducted in the context of the Croatian mentoring programme Velika Sestra Veliki Brat (Big sister big brother) (Žižak, Jeđud, Ustić, 2004) relied on focus groups of children, mentors, and social welfare centre professionals who recommended the children for inclusion in the programme, and has found similar positive aspects of mentoring. All focus group participants have given a positive assessment of the programme and have found it useful for the children who were included. The benefits included the expansion of the children's social circles, expansion of the activities they engaged in outside school, and alteration of unacceptable behaviours. The mentors and the professionals both found improvements in the children's self-images, and in their relationships with peers.

THE GENDER CONTEXT OF MENTORING

The gender aspect of child mentoring is important for multiple reasons, such as different needs and means of socializing girls and boys, different ways of responding to situations of stress and crisis. It is also relevant as an under-researched phenomenon. Various authors state that the gender aspect of mentoring is under-researched (Sosik and Godshalk, 2000; O'Neill and Blake-Beard, 2002; Young, Cady and Foxon, 2006; Darling et al., 2006; Fowler, Gudmundsson and O'Gorman, 2007; Rhodes et al., 2008), but they also find it extraordinarily important for the development of mentoring relationships. When we talk about gender, we mean a socially learned/determined behaviour, or as stated by Hodžić, Bijelić and Cesar (2003), people are born of male or female sex, but they learn to be boys and girls who will become men and women. Scandura and Ragins (1993, in O'Neill and Blake-Beard, 2002) note that masculinity, femininity and androgyny have more of an impact on the mentoring relationship than the mentor's biological sex.

Given the mentor's gender and the mentee's gender, we may differentiate between same-gendered

and cross-gendered mentoring pairs. *The same-gendered relationships* are those among female (male) mentors and female (male) mentees. *Cross-gendered* relationships are those between a male mentor and a female mentee, and vice versa.

The literature recognizes that fact that boys and girls have different mentoring needs and create different mentoring relationships over differing paths of developing relationships with their mentors (Bogat and Liang, 2005). The reason for that is likely found in the fact that boys and girls differ in biological, psychological, and social aspects of the developmental process. Even though some differences are apparent even prior to birth, they become most prominent during adolescence (Hromatko, 2009; Rudan, 2004). Without intending to engage in deeper discussion of these developmental differences, we will merely mention the research that provides a contextual basis for considering the impact of gender on the mentoring relationships. When exploring the ways in which boys and girls play, Maccoby (1998, in Underwood, 2003) suggests a theory of "two cultures" which concerns the different ways of playing, and differing structure of peer groups between the genders. The author suggests that this pattern of difference in play between boys and girls can be found across cultures and societies. The theory primarily relies on the fact that both boys and girls prefer to socialize and play in the same-gender groups, and when it comes to playing, they differ in styles, preferred activities, discourse, friendships, group size, strength and power. Girls tend to place more of an emphasis on relationships than on structured play and activities, and are more considerate and cooperative in communication, more likely to compromise and analyse. Their friendships are more intimate and more intense, and play out in smaller groups, with a focus on dyadic relationships. Furthermore, the author claims that the female groups are more susceptible to the influence of external actors (i.e. teachers and parents), and are less prone to excluding the boys than is the case the other way around. Gabriel and Gardner (1999, in Larsen and Buss, 2008) state that girls tend to describe their interpersonal relationships as the focal point of their identities, while Vulić-Prtorić (2000) argues that, when facing stress, girls tend to seek social support and practice avoidance, while boys are more focused on problem-solving and activity. In that sense, Darling et al.(2006) note that girls more often than boys seek emotional support in problem-solving.

Bogat and Liang (2005) list several ways in which gender affects mentoring. On of these is the need for different types of mentoring relationships. They also accentuate the importance of emotional support for girls in stressful situations. In that regard, they conclude that psychosocial mentoring is more characteristic of girls, as it focuses on the creation of relationships, while instrumental mentoring, as it deals with problem-solving is more characteristic of mentoring boys. Rhodes (2002, in Darling et al., 2006) states that girls join mentoring programmes because of problems in

relationships and communication, while boys more often join because of a need of a (male) role model. Based on these findings, there have been mentoring programs created in the US that targeted girls or boys only (e.g. Girls today women tomorrow, http://girlstodaywt.vpweb.com/default.html; Boys to men of Greater Washington, http://www.boystomengw.org/?q=aboutus).

The research on the impact of gender on mentoring relationships in a working environment (Sosik and Godshalk, 2000; Fowler, Gudmundsson and O'Gorman, 2007) also demonstrates that women tend to offer more emotional support and advising as mentors, while the men tend to be more focused on instrumental assistance. Furthermore, Sosik and Godshalk (2000) found that same-gender mentoring relationships among women include more friendship, counselling, and personal support than any other combination of genders.

In most of the mentoring programmes aimed at children, the mentoring pairs (child and mentor) are predominantly of the same gender, but since this is not always achievable, there are some relationships in which the child and the mentor are not of the same gender. When pairing children and mentors their gender-related needs are taken into account, as are the practical concerns of the mentors' availability. Practical experiences[4] in the Big Sister Big Brother mentoring programme indicate that there is a certain gender-related paradox at play: the mentors tend to be mostly female, while the children included in the programme tend to be male, making for cross-gender pairs as the most common occurrence.

Feist-Price (1994) suggests some reasons why in practice we find more of same-gender pairs/relationships:

- gender stereotypes, or the inclination to pair the mentor with a mentee of the same gender due to a greater level of understanding between the two
- greater possibility of identification with a person of the same gender
- fear of intimate relationships in mixed-gender pairs
- negative public attitudes towards mixed-gender mentoring pairs, especially when the mentees are younger children, and/or girls

4 One of the authors has for a long period of time been involved in the Big Sister Big Brother mentoring programme, first as a mentor, and later as an educator and supervisor.

RESEARCH AIMS

As noted, there are significant differences in the characteristics and needs of children and youths with regard to gender, which also affects the appearance of different mentoring needs. The aim of this project is thus to establish and describe the mentors' perspective on the experiences and perceptions of mentoring children, with regard to gender. The focus of the paper is on the point of view of the mentors included in the "Mentors in the Community" programme. The following research questions stem from the research aims:

- how is mentoring boys and girls perceived by the mentors?
- which gender-related mentoring characteristics are relevant to the mentors?

The research project is based on a qualitative approach to research, which also guides the formulation of the general hypothesis. We expect that the perspectives of the mentors involved in the "Mentors in the Community" programme, along with the use of qualitative research methods, will allow for new findings on the experiences and characteristics of child mentoring, especially as regards gender.

METHODS

Research participants

The project included the mentors taking part in the "Mentors in the Community" programme which has been active since 2009 as part of the Blue Phone Youth Helpline association activities. Prior to that, the same programme was being implemented under the name "Big Sister Big Brother" with the Association for Social Policy Initiatives. The programme has thus been in continuous implementation since 1998. This is in essence a Croatian implementation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme that originated in the US, with the main aims, content, and methods adopted directly from the American model. In 2009 the Blue Phone Youth Helpline association took over the implementation of the programme. The aim of the programme is to build and maintain a more permanent relationship between a grown up mentor and a child by means of building trust, friendship, and care (Jeđud and Ustić, 2009).

This project saw the participation of 20 mentors, 16 of which are women, and 4 are men. The mentors were selected using the criterion of the child's gender, thus creating three groups of participants, two with experience of same-gender mentoring, and one with experience of mixed-gender mentoring:

- women mentoring girls (N1=11)
- women mentoring boys (N3=5)
- men mentoring boys (N2=4)

When selecting the women, the criterion of the child's age has been used as well, with the aim of forming a group of respondents that have had experience of mentoring children in different age groups. All of the men included in the mentoring programme have been included in the project. It is important to point out that the groups of participants have not been made equal in numbers, nor do they reflect the actual number of mentors in the programme. However, the ratio of participants in each of the groups is an approximation of the current state of the programme when it comes to mentoring pairs of same v. mixed gender.

Women mentoring girls

There were 11 women who mentor girls included in our research project. The mentors' average age was 25.5, with most of them in the 19-24 range, and two over the age of 30. They were mostly university students (predominantly studying social work, though there was one each from the departments of psychology, economics, and architecture), while five of them had already finished their undergraduate degrees (a physician, a sociologist, art historian, electrical engineer, and a social pedagogue).

Women mentoring boys

This subgroup of mentors was made up of five women. Their average age was 23.5. They were mostly students (in social pedagogy, psychology, Croatian and Polish, and journalism), while one of them was a pharmacist.

Men mentoring boys

There were four men in this group. Their average age was 23.25, with a range of 19 to 26. Three were students (geodesic science, medicine, political science), and one was an electrical engineer along with being a student of mathematics.

Data acquisition methods

This process was preceded by an initial insight into the documentation on children included in the program, with only those children who had been in the mentoring process for at least three months

being chosen. This way, we wanted to make sure that the mentors had sufficient information about the child, and enough experience of the mentoring relationship.

The plan was to collect data in focus groups, but the time constraints among the mentors in conjunction with the organization of the data acquisition process necessitated that some of the information be gathered in interviews, both in person, and via email. Seven focus groups were conducted, along with two in-person interviews, and one interview via email. This resulted in a limitation of this project, as no single method was used for gathering data. Furthermore, due to attrition, the focus groups ended up smaller than planned, making for a larger number of small focus groups.

These focus groups were guided according to a prepared guidelines that encompassed the following areas of discussion: the reasons behind the mentors' decisions to take part in the programme, previous mentoring experiences, the mentors' understanding of child mentoring, mentors' experiences in mentoring, their perception of benefits for the mentees, perception of gender in mentoring, and recommendations to the leaders of mentoring programmes.

The focus groups and interviews, as well as electronic data gathering, were all implemented in a way that ensured the respondents' understanding of the aim and purpose of the research project. The focus groups and interviews have been recorded and transcribed. Oral consent was acquired from all respondents, both for taking part in the project, and for recording of the interview/focus group. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity, and were offered to be informed of the results of the research project. All interviews and focus groups were lead by one of the authors.

The focus group meetings lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, while the interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour.

Data analysis methods

The data analysis relied on a qualitative approach of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a process of identifying, analysing, and reporting based on so called forms (themes) that are recognized in the data. A theme is a form that can in principle be defined in two ways: inductive or deductive. The inductive definition assumes the creation of a theme based on an insight into the data, while the deductive definition is based on setting the topics in accordance with the theoretical or analytical interest of the researcher.

The themes that served as the data analysis framework in this project were as follows:

- the ways in which the mentors got involved in the mentoring programme
- the perception of child mentoring
- the characteristics of the mentoring relationship
- the perception of the mentees' benefit
- the role of gender in the mentoring relationship
- the mentors' recommendations

Within each of the themes, the data were analysed through a coding procedure that established the presence of appropriate codes and categories. The coding units were underlined in the original text, which was followed by their joining into categories (an example of this is provided in Table 1). The data were processed for each participant group individually, and were then considered as a pooled source of data, so that the conclusions regarding the research purpose and aims may be drawn.

Table 1: Sample data processing procedure.

THEME	ORIGINAL TEXT	CODE	CATEGORY
The way in which the responded was included in the programme	*I found out about it online, on the volunteer centre website; I googled "volunteering Zagreb", and the VCZ website was one of the results, which is where I found that program*	Internet	**The source of information concerning the programme**
	I found out about the programme through a friend; *I found out about it from a university colleague.*	Acquaintances	
	I sent what Goga asked, I filled in the questionnaire, passed the	Filling in the	

	training; *I sent in my application... I went to the interview... and that is how it all started.*	application form Interview Training	**The formal procedure for inclusion in the programme**

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the results will be structured through the description of perceptions of all three groups of mentors,[5] and through the use of the following thematic areas: - the ways in which the mentors got involved in the mentoring programme, the perception of child mentoring, the characteristics of the mentoring relationship, the perception of the mentees' benefit, the role of gender in the mentoring relationship, and the mentors' recommendations for programme leaders. The paper will therefore describe these topics and their pertaining categories, while some of the results will be additionally substantiated by utilising the participants' direct quotes.[6] We also note that some of the topics will be presented together, since their contents tie on to one another, while others will be presented individually. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and their pertaining categories.

Table 2: Themes and categories

Themes	**Categories**
The ways in which the mentors got involved in the programme and previous experiences	Sources of information about the programme. Formal procedure of involvement. Motivation for involvement.
The perception of child mentoring	Guidance and direction Providing a positive role model Introducing the child to a different life Friendship Mutual learning

5 Detailed description of each individual perspective would be too wide to be included in this paper, so only summary results are demonstrated here. The entire set of materials is available from the authors, upon request.

6 The codes and categories will be presented in **bold** typeface, while the direct quotes will be in *italic* typeface.

	Influencing and teaching
The characteristics of the mentoring relationship	The characteristics of the child The mentor-mentee matching criteria The aims of the mentoring relationship The characteristics of the mentoring relationship
The role of gender in the mentoring relationship and the children's specific gains	Through the prism of the benefit for the child Elements that the role of gender depends on The connection of age and gender Gender as a facilitating factor
Recommendations for programme leaders	Positive attitude towards the programme Lack of male mentors Recommendations for future mentors Recommendations concerning the matching process

The ways of getting involved in the mentoring programme

With regard to the way in which they got involved in the "Mentoring in the Community" programme, the research participants talked about the **sources of information about the programme**, and the **formal procedure of becoming involved** which was mandated by the programme. The mentors were predominantly informed online, more specifically, by using the Zagreb Volunteering Centre's website, where the volunteering advertisement for the mentoring programme was posted. Some of the mentors also stated that they received the information on getting involved from friends and acquaintances, and in some cases even from family members. The sequence of their involvement matched the formal requirements of the programme procedures (for more details, see Jeđud and Ustić, 2009), and these descriptions were very similar across all respondents, who describe the processes of application, interview, education, and other.

The mentors also talked about personal **motivation for involvement** in the mentoring programme, and their positive attitudes towards mentoring and the possibility of having an influence on other people (children) through the mentoring relationship (*You know, you can have at least a little bit of influence on somebody, and especially help children in this sort of situation.*)

The mentors also spoke of some personal gains, such as a valuable use of their free time, and the ability to use volunteering as part of their training (this was mentioned by the social work students). When it comes to previous experiences, the mentors mostly listed prior volunteering: the women mentioned volunteering with children and adults, while the men talked about projects in conservation and agriculture. None of the three groups had any previous experience of formal mentoring. However, both the women and the men mentoring boys listed the experiences of informal mentoring (*...maybe a little bit in communication with my younger cousins...; during high school while tutoring my neighbours in maths, and, I don't know, when they got older and, well, for advice...).*

The perceptions of child mentoring

When asked about their personal perceptions of mentoring children, and the definition of mentoring, both the men and the women mentioned the elements that are found in the academic literature. They mentioned positive **guidance and direction** of the child (*you guide him, motivate him to, for himself, to develop within his possibilities and potentials*), **providing a positive role model** (*...exposure to an encouraging influence and role model*), and **introducing the child to a different way of life** (*taking them into this world that they have never been in...*). Guidance and direction, along with provision of a positive role model are the elements mentioned in the literature (Jeđud and Ustić, 2009), while introducing the child to a different way of life is an additional element that the respondents built into their perception of mentoring, based on their own experiences. It is important to point out that all of the mentors in the "Mentors in the Community" programme had to pass mandatory training that has, among other things, introduced them to the theoretical tenets of mentoring. By thus combining the information acquired from the programme leaders, and their own mentoring experiences, they create their own understanding of mentoring.

While the above perception of mentoring was shared among all the mentors, there are some differences across the three groups. Thus the women and men mentoring boys placed more emphasis on **friendship with the child** and **mutual learning** (*I have a feeling that, well, I learned so many things in that whole relationship, it is mutual learning*), while the women mentoring girls talked more about **their influence on the girls and teaching the girls**. This group of mentors thus saw the mentoring relationship as a combination of a friendly relationship with that of a teacher and pupil. Thus, based on these findings, we may say that the mentoring relationships with boys are

described as more similar to friendships, while the relationships with girls are more aimed at solving specific problems and satisfying the girls' needs, in a way that may allow for this relationship to be more of a sponsorship. Interestingly, the results are not in line with the expectations in the literature, which characterizes the mentoring relationships with boys as those that are focused on solving specific problems and satisfying needs.

The characteristics of the mentoring relationship

The following categories of mentors' responses have been found to demonstrate the characteristics of the mentoring relationship: the characteristics of the child, the criteria for matching children and mentors, the aims of the mentoring relationship, and the characteristics of the relationship as it unfolded.

It is interesting that the mentors most commonly refer to their mentees as *"brother/sister"*, which is in line with the programme's previous title. It is obvious, then, that even though the name of the programme has changed, the metaphor of the relationship is still present on an every-day basis in the implementation of this mentoring programme.

With regard to the characteristics of the mentees, all three groups of respondents provided similar answers to our questions. The mentors note that these are children-at-risk, by which they refer to risks related to the child itself (poor academic performance, behavioural problems, emotional problems, problems related to risky sexual behaviour, and other), the child's family (single-parent family, abandonment by the father, parental neglect, brothers'/sisters' behavioural problems, inadequate styles of upbringing, and other), as well as those apparent in the child's environment (a lack of friends, spending time with older children, peer groups that exhibit risky behaviours). It can be noted here that the children included in the mentoring process exhibit a series of risks, some of which make the mentoring relationship difficult. When it comes to girls, their mentors note a higher number of risk factors than the boys' mentors do. It is also interesting that the mentors also note the child's positive attributes, along with the risk factors, which indicates that the mentors see the children in a way that encompasses their problems and their positive characteristics. This is a feature of these assistive professions that do not treat at-risk children as merely a set of problems, but rather consciously consider the child as a person that also has a positive side that maybe needs to be discovered, and that is the foundation for further interventions and activities.

When talking about matching/pairing criteria, the mentors all talked about accepting the suggestions given by the programme leaders, even if some of them had initially had an image of the child they would want to mentor, with regard to age, gender, and other characteristics. Here, the women mentoring girls were particularly specific about the characteristics of the child they wanted to mentor, with regard to age and gender, but also the child's location and risk factor (*I asked for something milder, some milder form of risk.*). The men were more likely to mention their doubts about *"whether they are allowed to turn down"* the child that was chosen for them, given the programme's lack of male mentors and the possibility that a child might be left mentor-less if they were to refuse to work with them (*Because I assume that we all went into this with the position that we do no feel invited to choose, this whether we want to or not because we are not here to reject someone, say we won't, because the issue is whether the child would get someone, given the lack of volunteers.*).

At the beginning of the process, the mentors were encouraged to set specific goals they would like to achieve in the mentoring relationship. These goals are primarily set with regard to the child, and are often related to the reasons why the child was included in the programme in the first place. The mentors listed the following aims of the mentoring relationships: altering the child's unacceptable attitudes, encouraging the child's positive development, the child's acquisition of new knowledge and skills, encouragement of useful spending of one's free time, provision of support and assistance in times of difficulty. It is interesting that the women talked about the aims directed at the child, while the men took a somewhat broader view and spoke of the aims with regard to the mentoring relationship (*I had one aim, and that was to establish a good quality relationship.*) through which they may fulfil the aims related directly to the child.

In the category of responses that concern the **characteristics of the mentoring relationship**, both the women and the men spoke of the difficulties experiences in the beginning of the relationship (*She tested me quite a lot in the beginning, about, how much I was actually committed to it.)* Both the men and the women who mentored boys note that the relationships became stable after the initial difficulties, while the women mentoring girls mentioned difficulties even beyond this initial phase (*With time, she started avoiding it all, and somehow not answering the phone and I don't know, so that it all became quite rare*). The mentors mostly gave positive assessments of their relationships with the children, with the exception of women mentoring girls who have in some cases characterized their mentoring relationships as less successful, or even not at all successful. It does appear that, in this context, the mentoring relationships with girls are somewhat more demanding than those with boys.

With regard to that, the mentors' answers concerning the frequency of meetings are interesting. They mostly spoke of weekly meetings, while some reported meeting on fewer occasions (once in two weeks), which depended on theirs, and the child's obligations. Even though we have not tested for this, it may be that the age of the child may be a relevant factor in the frequency of meetings: older children typically have to deal with a greater number of obligations. We thus know from the literature that mentors working with adolescents tend to have more difficulty scheduling meetings because adolescents have more of school obligations and extracurricular activities (Cavell, Smith, 2005; Darling, 2005). In this regard, it is interesting to note that some of the women mentoring girls reported a larger number of weekly meetings, which can be related to the earlier notes on the more demanding nature of the mentoring relationships with girls.

When talking about **joint activities**, all three groups of respondents talked about passive activities outside the child's home, or in town (going to the cinema, walks, visiting museums, visiting shopping malls). These activities are the children's' favourites, and simultaneously do not require much preparation on the part of the mentors. Mentors working with boys were more likely to list playing computer games as activities, as well as engaging in sports. This is in line with the findings in the literature concerning the mentoring relationship with boys (Bogat and Liang, 2005), and in that sense the women mentoring boys have adapted to their interests. Regarding the ways of working with the children, the mentors mostly mention conversations and socializing, especially with girls.

The role of the mentoring relationship and the specific benefit for the child

At the beginning, it is important to note that the mentors, in spite of being asked about "gender", gave responses about "sex", which can be explained by the latter term's more general acceptance and use in quotidian communication that the former is. Colloquially, the term "sex" is used both in its original meaning of biological characteristics, and as meaning the social role.

The mentors see the role of gender in the mentoring relationship though the **prism of the child's welfare**, i.e. they talk about how a female or male mentor may affect a boy or a girl. Primarily, they list the **elements that the role of gender depends on**, and these are the personal and family characteristics of the children (*This depends on these individual characteristics of the child, what environment they are growing up in, whether they have siblings, and what their relationship is; For*

example, a boy growing up only with his mother, who is very protective, might use the influence of a man, so it might be better for this boy to get a big brother.). The mentors thus think that gender does not have a direct effect, but that its role in the mentoring relationship depends on numerous other circumstances. In that sense, the mentors point out the importance of the child's age, or rather a **link between the child's gender and age**, especially during puberty. Both the male and female mentors found that it is more important that the child has a mentor of the same gender when in puberty, for two reasons. The first is that there is a greater likelihood of identification and learning the gender model, while the second is the potential for romance when the mentoring pairs are not of the same gender (*In this sort of sensitive time of puberty it may really be possible for some feelings to appear on their end... it may then be better, definitely, that they are of the same gender*). Some of the women noted certain prejudice that exists in the environment concerning the mixed-gender pairs, especially those of the male mentor and the female mentee (*Because of some prejudice, maybe... And maybe because of fear that these all sorts of predators, that is difficult to assess in interviews... so that there could not be any, any abuse, or abuse of the child's trust or something similar... on the other hand it is not exclusively the men that could... but that is the world we live in, these are these prejudice and labels, and that is how it goes.*). This type of thinking among the mentors suggests reasons why in practice we most commonly see mentoring pairs of the same gender (Feist-Price, 1994), and these are in turn related to the fear of intimate relationships between the mentor and the mentee, and the negative attitudes in the public. Given that this is a mentoring programme for children, we do find that this sort of cautious approach is justified, but we must also ask whether this practice of matching same-gender mentoring pairs and a strict avoidance of the male mentor - female mentee pair is really just contributing to the maintenance of the negative attitudes and prejudice in the general public, but also among practitioners.

The mentors in same-gender pairings discuss **gender as a facilitating factor during the relationship,** and mostly in the context of joint activities. Thus the male mentors working with boys find that pairs of the same gender can engage in a wider spectrum of joint activities, while the mentor in the corss-gender pairs must spend more time figuring out the appropriate activities (*A big brother and a little brother can find lots of things in common... so with your little bro you can find this one thing that connects you... with them (girls), it would be more difficult to find this one common thing.*) The women mentoring girls and the women mentoring boys found positive aspects of mixed pairs, with regard to gaining an insight into a different gender perspective, and the process of growing up from the perspective of the boys (*You can learn a lot, hm, about these gender differences because you get a 13, 14, or 15-year old and you see him create, you see this image of the world created from a gender perspective that is different... if you are of the opposite sex, you see this shift, where it is made, precisely in these crucial years, of puberty, when it develops.).*

The mentors' recommendations

All three groups of mentors mentioned the recommendations they have for the programme leaders, but also for potential mentors. Primarily, they focus on **their positive attitude towards the programme** (*One of the better quality programmes being implemented in this country.*), and toward its specific parts, such as the idea behind the programme, or mentoring itself. *The very concept is ideal, meaning ideal, you have someone who won't bother you about school, won't bother you about this, bother you about that. Meaning, this is not a parent, but is still someone who cares about you, who cares for you, who hangs out with you, and that is brilliant*.

The women mentoring girls and men mentoring boys mentioned **a lack of male mentors** in the programme (*The only thing is that at least this year more girls than guys have entered the programme, so that, so there is perhaps not even much of an opportunity to choose...)*, while also giving more concrete ideas for improving the programme *(...specifically I would maybe recommend perhaps better advertising of the whole programme, better visibility of the programme*).

Women mentoring girls also provided specific messages **to future mentors** based on their own mentoring experiences, i.e. the perceived mistakes that they made in their mentoring relationships. They point out a need for the mentor to take a firm position in the relationship, the importance of trust for the relationship, and the importance of the mentor and the child having similar personalities.

The mentors also noted some **recommendations regarding the process of matching children and mentors**, concerning the relevance of the preparation of future mentors, setting of realistic expectations of the relationship, and taking the mentor's choice of the child's gender into account. They also add that the process of matching children with volunteers needs to take into account a wide array of circumstances (expectations, needs, interests of the child, and of the mentor), with gender being just one among many dimensions that need attention.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, we look back at some of the research questions that we started this project with, and provide guidelines for further development of this particular mentoring programme.

The first research question was about the **ways in which mentoring boys and girls is experienced by their mentors**. The mentors' experience is primarily a positive one. The perceive mentoring as a useful and necessary intervention for both boys and girls. Mentoring is, in their view, a sort of guidance, direction of the child in a positive manner, their introduction to a different way of life,

and the provision of a positive role model in their lives. Additionally, the women mentoring girls talk more about their influence on the mentees, while both the women and men mentoring boys discuss the friendship they developed and the mutual learning they engaged in. With regard to the **characteristics of mentoring with regard to the gender of the mentors and children, from the mentors' perspective**, the results indicate that girls more frequently meet their mentors than boys do. Both men and women mentors spend time with their mentees in passive activities outside the child's home. Mentoring boys included more of sporting activities on top of that. The relationships with boys were found to be more successful, while the relationships with girls were in some cases assessed as less successful. For the respondents, the girls in the programme are displaying higher levels of risky behaviours than boys are, which may lead to the mentoring of girls being found more difficult. On top of that, the relationship's course is more unstable with female mentees.

Both women and men found that there are differences in mentoring boys, as opposed to girls, and have noted that these differences stem from the specific characteristics of the child. Mentors also mentioned the differences that originate in the gender-specific interests, such as the girls' inclination towards conversation and socializing, while the boys displaying more interest in sport and computer games. All mentors tend to agree that gender is important in mentoring relationships, but that the effect of gender is not direct, but is rather dependent on other, potentially even more important factors, such as the age of the child, and the child's personal characteristics, but also the age and characteristics of the mentor. Both the women and the men particularly noted the importance of age, the role of which has in some cases been greater than that of gender. Mentors also state that gender can ease the beginning of the mentoring relationship, and can act as the element that connects the pair, but can also provide an element of learning about the "opposite" gender, in the case of the mixed pairs.

Based on our results, we can single out several guidelines for the further development of the "Mentors in the Community" programme in particular, but also for the mentoring programmes in general. First, it is important to point out that there have not been many research projects dedicated to mentoring programmes in Croatia, even though this type of programme is more and more commonly offered by both the social welfare institutions and the civil society organizations (e.g. the mentoring programme of the Ardura association in Šibenik, http://www.udruga-ardura.com/index.php/ct-menu-item-13/ct-menu-item-15, and that of the Pragma association, http://www.udruga-pragma.hr). It is obvious that the value of mentoring as a source of value in the growth and development of children is being increasingly recognized among the professionals, which is why we think that these programs and child mentoring merit further research. In the context of this paper, further research on the effect of the children's age and gender seem particularly important. In that sense, it would be interesting to be introduced to the perspective of

the programme leaders with regard to the role of gender in mentoring, and the gender and age criteria used to match a volunteer with a child. Along with this professional perspective, it is also important to research the opinions of the children taking part in mentoring, and their views concerning the gender of their mentors.

This research tackled the issue of gender in the context of mentoring children, but along with this element, it also problematised some others, such as the mentors' positive experiences, and the recognition of the usefulness of mentoring work with children. We consider this a major potential in the communities, these young people who are willing to volunteer and through socializing assist a child in the process of growing up. The research also found that there is a lack of male mentors, which is not unusual in the so-called educational professions, where there has been talk of a "feminization" of the profession (Polić, 2003). It is obvious that this trend is extended in the organizations of the civil society in the same area of work. The visibility and promotion of the programmes need more investment, so that the availability of male mentors would increase, specifically though activities designed to appeal to men. These activities include involvement of a publicly known person as mentors,[7] or additional points for access to university stipends for those who have taken part in mentoring programmes. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the realistic options before the existing programmes when thinking about these activities.

We hope that this paper will contribute to a better understanding of the potential that mentoring has in the process of growing up, and that I may serve as encouragement for further development of new mentoring programmes, and further research in the area. Given the increase in interest for mentoring children and youths who are at risk, and the gradual increase in the volume of mentoring programmes over the last several years,[8] this is certainly an area that warrants particular attention of the researchers. Given that the number of children, youths, and mentors included in mentoring is still small, and that the area is under-researched, it is likely that qualitative approaches will remain dominant for a while. The specificity of the qualitative approach, which aims for a deeper consideration of particular phenomena will certainly allow for better understanding of the dynamics and specificities of the mentoring relationship. In that sense, future research might try to utilize methods other than interviews and focus groups, which are only rarely found in the Croatian literature. These would include observation with participation, case studies, and active participative research that would include the children and mentors as respondents and researchers.

7 For example, the popularity of the character played by George Clooney on the TV show E.R. was used for this purpose. His character was a physician who was mentoring a boy.

8 According to the information acquired by the authors, there are new programmes being developed in Osijek and Čakovec, while the area of the City of Zagreb has seen two new mentoring programmes being developed over the past year.

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