Findings Report of Mentor Case Studies

RENYO project

Re-engaging young offenders with education and learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report contains the main results obtained through the education staff's Authentic Inquiry (AI). The main objective is to synthesise the findings, insights and challenges found by education staff (mentors) after conducting their own AIs.

The procedure used to collect the information was as follows. Professionals who work in custodial settings with young people in conflict with the law were trained in the implementation of the AI methodology. This activity was carried out in the four countries participating in the project (the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and Spain). As a practical way to better understand the AI methodology, they conducted their own Authentic Inquiry. After that, they completed the "mentor case study template", which reflects their experience of applying the AI methodology to themselves, while reflecting on the best way to conduct AIs with young people.

The information collected is useful for, on the one hand, adapting the AI to local contexts and settings; and, on the other, for professionals to learn from their peers' experience in applying the AI.

Each partner was in charge of training the professionals in their country, collecting the case studies and selecting some of them (and translating into English when required) to prepare this document. Finally, 15 mentor case studies were used (3 from the United Kingdom, 5 from Italy, 4 from Germany, and 3 from Spain).

2. MENTORS' EXPERIENCE COMPLETING THEIR OWN AIs

This section presents a summary of findings, insights and challenges found by education staff (mentors) in the process of completing their own AIs.

The time spent completing their own AIs varied widely among the mentors, from 2-4 hours (excluding the training time) to 3 weeks. The variation in time spent is directly related to the artefact developed.

Most mentors had no difficulty completing their own AI. Some had a hard time imagining the whole process at the beginning, but they became more comfortable as they progressed through the steps. For example, choosing a topic was easy (object) (Step 1) for almost all mentors, except for two: one that reported feeling overwhelmed and insecure in the face of all the possibilities, and another who stated that finding topics was difficult and the thinking required

often felt abstract and complicated. Steps 2 (observing & describing) and 3 (wondering about & interrogating) were easy and fun for most of the mentors. However, some mentors noted that these steps required a lot of time to study all the aspects that surround the topic in order to be able to transmit them and make this task fun to practice for other people. Others had doubts about whether what they had achieved was enough or, on the contrary, they had to continue looking for new points of view and lengthen the description. Step 4 (discovering or storying) turned out to be a bit more difficult than previous ones. One of the mentors said that sharing this experience with the group helped her complete this step.

The greatest difficulty faced was related to the use of the platform. Some of the mentors felt a bit lost with the platform rating. Others considered that the information provided by the platform was interesting but didn't see its usefulness. Finally, another mentor expressed that the greatest difficulty he found was with the extension of his investigation to the public sphere (Step 6).

3. MENTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BEST WAY TO CONDUCT AIs WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

When reflecting on the best way to conduct AIs with young people, the mentors' perceptions were:

Step 1 (Choosing the Topic):
- Give them time to think.
- Leave them in complete freedom.
- Dialogue with them.
- Talk about the students' interests. Ask them what kind of hobbies they have.
- Make them choose something they would bring to a desert island.
- Explain the purpose of the AI to them beforehand.
- Tell them about other people's experiences (examples), particularly from other youths. It could help them to engage and believe in what they are doing.
- Present the AI methodology as a game.
- Listen without prejudice.
- Establish a prior relationship with the youth based on on trust, empathic listening, etc.
- Identify what makes the young people feel comfortable and use it as a setting for discussion.
- Encourage them to explore within themselves, their environment, their future perspectives and their past experiences so that they have a wider spectrum to choose from instead of limiting themselves to simple belongings.

- Collect students' ideas in a group discussion, and support them if they have questions about specific topics.

Steps 2 (Observing & Describing) and 3 (Wondering about & Interrogating):
- Stimulate curiosity/interest in digging into the theme.
- Encourage them to be spontaneous.
- Lead them to think about themselves and their characteristics in order to understand where they can, want to and must improve.
- Mentors should have complete knowledge of the process and an understanding about materials they are going to be provided with, and the level of commitment of the staff members.
- Show them respect, trust, confidentiality, and give the due importance to the object chosen. Do not kid or comment in a way such that the young person thinks they are being judged; otherwise, they will choose trivial objects that will not connect with their inner AI. They are teenagers, and they constantly fear being judged, probably because of previous experiences like that.
- Present it as a game.
- Give suggestions.
- Talk about the topic.
- Provide forms of media.
- Give examples.
- Try to include all senses, like closing their eyes and relaxing.
- Give them time and space to embrace their ideas and to encourage them.

Step 4 (Discovering or Storying):
- Provide them with examples or formulate different examples of questions together.
- Give them all the space they need to tell their story.
- Make them fell free and comfortable.
- Be open, transparent, sensitising (students/mentors).
- Apply reflection methods.
- Help them to wonder about their acts, about the reason why they feel attracted to some specific objects, friendships, kinds of music, etc. or the importance they give to family, to other cultures or to other people they admire.
- It is important to know the young person, make them engage, make sure they are already built into the centre so that they can put focus on the activity.
- Writing a letter to someone beloved can be a good option.

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Steps 5 (Navigating & Mapping) and 6 (Spanning & Connecting):
- Help them to notice how everything is connected (even the simplest things), to see the relation between their objects and the power of learning (they will realise that not everything is learnt in the same way, but that there are many paths and ways to learn).
- Help them to focus on its functionality.
- Tell them about some experience related by another young person or mentor.
- Provide a wide range of materials, such as books, videos, internet resources, and give young people freedom to choose by themselves.
- Conduct a group activity.

Step 7 (Interacting & Incorporating):
- Walk alongside the young person in their journey, encouraging them to go on or to rest, but without demanding. The student must be aware of their own rhythm and they must remain updated on their progress.
- Make them more aware of their capabilities.
- Help them to understand what they want to be and why.
- Use audio-visual media, cartoons, drawings, etc. (young people struggle with writing).
- Provide them with materials and technical tools.

Step 8 (Reconciling & Validating):
- Show this moment as the achievement of an objective.
- Give positive feedback and public recognition.
- Create an environment of no judgement.
- Promote creativity (with educational exercises).
- Train them in self- reflective behaviour.

The opinions of mentors regarding the time needed to conduct the AI with young people vary widely, from hours to months. However, there seems to be some consensus that sessions should not last more than 1 hour to maintain focus. There should not be much time between sessions (e.g., once or two per week or diary) so the learner does not disconnect from the AI. Other mentors are in favour of dedicating the time that young people need (some people need more time than others).

Regarding the possibility of conducting the AI individually or in very small groups: supporters of the former argue that it takes on a more important and profound value, which can feed the relationship itself in its realisation. Supporters of the latter argue that the group setting always helps to not feel weird and lost, providing greater support to foster interest; it is more fun and motivating.

Mentors identified some challenges, which are: lack of engagement in the project, impatience, lack of skills to perform project-related tasks, making the students understand the usefulness of the AI, lack of motivation, and mistrust. Building lasting and meaningful relationships (because young people are often transferred or have to serve short sentences) has also been identified as a challenge.

Most mentors stated that the level of internet access of the young people they work with was good, except for the case of Germany.

With regard to the hints and tips on the online platform, most mentors find them useful. Some mentors stated that the platform could be difficult for young people.