Combating bullying through peer-mentoring

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Abstract

Ase Welsh was a Humanities teacher and Subject Leader in History when she initiated and led a series of development projects aimed at helping students to overcome barriers to learning in a secondary school.

When I first joined the Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) group at Astley Cooper School, I had no clear aim in mind. I found my work at the school challenging and wanted to find better strategies for addressing some of the barriers to learning that many of my students seemed to suffer from. My participation in the TLDW group enabled me to identify my professional concerns which became the starting points for a series of development projects. Having completed three such projects I sat down to write a commentary which would allow me to reflect critically on what I had achieved and consider what they had contributed to the development of practice in the school as a whole.

A common thread running through my projects was the need to help students to overcome the challenges they face, both in their learning and socially. I was committed to try and foster in my students the skills they need to be successful in the wider world. In articulating my values I drew encouragement from David Hargreaves who said the following.

> At the heart of moral purpose in education is the professional commitment to ensuring and further developing the well-being of every student.
>
> (Hargreaves, 2008: 2)

This is also reflected in the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (DfES, 2003) which promotes the conviction that children can overcome the difficulties they face through involvement in school life, receiving recognition and praise and having positive role models.

Starting with support for controlled assessment

My first project addressed an issue that arose when a new approach to assessment for the GCSE History was brought in. My awareness of the need for mentoring came later. The new GCSE regulations required controlled assessment rather than independent coursework. I devised a set of homework tasks which involved Key Stage 3 students completing written tasks within a particular time frame to try to mimic the conditions they would have to face in controlled assessments for their GCSE examinations. This was discussed within the Humanities Faculty and the idea was taken up by the team as a whole. We evaluated the initiative by asking students for their views. We asked them to carry out self-assessment in their books and then discuss this with me in focus group sessions. I wanted to tap into their 'collective expertise' on controlled assessment (James *et al.*, 2006). I prepared questions in advance to ensure that the time in the sessions was used effectively (Durrant and Holden, 2006). These evaluations provided me with useful information about how successful the controlled assessments were and how we could improve and refine the process for the students. We discussed the outcomes in meetings of the Humanities Faculty and subsequently, we were invited to share our work with colleagues at a whole school staff conference. I received positive feedback from staff who felt it would be a useful tool for them to use although I felt that the impact of this was limited, perhaps because colleagues were required to attend, rather than wanting to attend.

Although this project dealt with a relatively superficial dimension of educational achievement, it nevertheless had an impact in a number of important ways. From a personal perspective, it helped me to realise the importance of experimenting with, and refining, a process in order to aid students in their learning. It also helped me to appreciate how important it is to gather the views of students and other staff members in order to improve your work and tailor it to their needs. I learnt that, as a leader, you have to be responsible for moving things forward and you have to try to find ways to overcome the barriers you face in your work in order to be successful.

The use of mentoring to combat bullying

At the conclusion of this project, I felt proud of what I had accomplished and very positive about the whole experience of leading an initiative. I enjoyed sharing ideas with colleagues and eliciting their advice. The impetus for a second project came when

my school commissioned an external survey of staff, students and parents. This aimed to identify what the school did well in a number of different areas and also highlight the issues and problems which needed to be addressed. One of the top concerns for parents and students was the way in which the school controlled and tackled bullying. I was interested in this as I was teaching Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) to Year 7 at the time and we were looking at bullying. I approached my headteacher and suggested that I could ask the students to produce a display on anti-bullying. She told me that she was having a meeting with some KS3 students about how to tackle the problem during the following week and asked me if I would like to come along. I was keen to be involved in this and agreed.

During the meeting with the students, a number of interesting ideas were put forward. The students came up with the idea of having mentors to help new students settle into school but said that they thought it was better if these students were closer in age to the new Year 7 students. Following this meeting the Headteacher and I discussed the ideas and arranged to have a meeting with the Progress Leader of KS3 and the Assistant Headteacher who had responsibility for anti-bullying activities in the school. The idea of mentoring was discussed in this meeting and it was suggested that I should be asked to assume responsibility for this. At first I felt nervous about this; I had never been involved in anything outside my subject area before and the challenge of trying something new, and more importantly, wanting to make it a success, was daunting.

I consulted colleagues and began to put together an action plan which aimed to address how mentoring would work. This included strategies for selecting the mentors, raising awareness of mentoring in school, and dealing with incidents of bullying through mentoring. The action plan helped me to prioritise and organise. The first step was to recruit the mentors which I did through assemblies which would also provide an opportunity to raise awareness among both the students and the staff. I felt the recruitment of my mentors was a powerful opportunity to develop students as leaders (Frost and Roberts, 2011). I wanted to encourage them to be responsible and to make their own decisions.

The students seemed enthusiastic and many took application forms. Once I had received the completed application forms, decisions were made about who the mentors would be. They were invited to attend

a one day training session with me. This aimed to develop the skills they would need to be successful mentors, such as listening and decision-making. I also felt it was important to cover confidentiality and child protection with them so that they would know what to do if they were presented with a sensitive situation. Initially, I planned for mentoring to run twice a week: one session would be a breakfast club, designed to support students and set them up positively for the day ahead; the other session would be a drop-in session, where anyone experiencing problems or bullying could come along and meet with a mentor. Responsibilities with mentors were agreed and mentoring was promoted via assemblies, posters in register racks and letters home to parents.
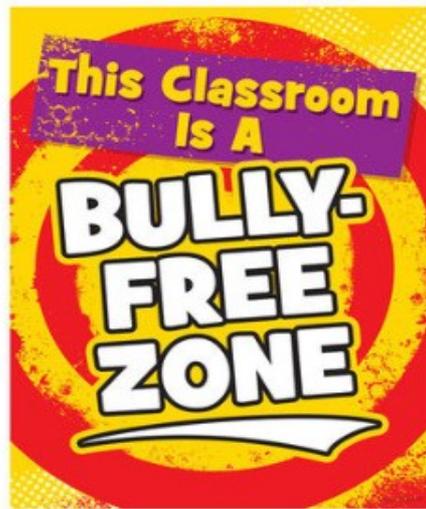
Initially, we didn't have many students attending mentoring. I realise now that change is about initiating a process that will be to some extent unpredictable (Fullan, 1993). This was certainly true of mentoring at the start. I had sought to bring about a change in the way we handled bullying as a school but could not predict how well this would be received by staff and students. It was pleasing to see that numbers participating increased as the year went on. One of the reasons for this was that the Anti-Bullying Week I organised with my mentors was successful in raising awareness of what we did. Secondly, I found that students did not always want to attend on a voluntary basis so attendance was made compulsory for some students. I also worked with the Behaviour Unit in school, who referred some students who were involved in bullying incidents and needed help in improving their behaviour. By Christmas we had a

core of 'regulars' in mentoring and it had established itself with the students to the point that attending mentoring became part of their weekly routine and this meant that less reminders needed to be given to some students.

Evaluating and refining the provision

I needed to continually reassess and evaluate mentoring in order to keep it moving forward. After one term, I decided to disband the breakfast club and replace it with another drop-in session as there appeared to be more of a need for this. This proved to be successful. In addition, I sought to get my mentors involved in as many aspects of school life as I could. I wanted to continue to develop them as leaders. It is clear to me now that participation becomes far more effective when students are able to make decisions and have opportunities to take part in improving the school and contributing to leadership (McBeath, Frost, Frost and Pedder, 2007). They played an instrumental role in the preparation and execution of an Anti-Bullying Week. I sought their ideas and felt that the week would have a more powerful impact if the ideas for it came from them. This view is echoed by other teachers in the HertsCam Network including two colleagues from a primary school who had pushed the boundaries of pupil participation.

> Involving children in the planning process had a very powerful effect as they felt empowered and valued in undertaking this important role.
>
> (Edwards and Gilbert, 2011: 19)

I wanted my mentors to know that their ideas and contributions were valued. I also felt that a key component in successfully creating an effective 'dialogic climate' was to ensure that my students had influence over what they did (McBeath *et al.,* 2007). This view is reinforced in Schultz Jorgensen's 'Ladder of Participation' (2004) which clearly shows that participation becomes most effective when students are making decisions albeit with support from adults. I continued to involve the mentors as much as possible because of this. In the autumn term, I selected a number of mentors to come in and work with Year 7s in STRIVE lessons to promote mentoring and run some anti-bullying workshops with the students (www.strivenetwork.org). I felt this was important in helping the mentors to build relationships and trust with the younger students so that mentees would feel more comfortable in approaching them if they had a problem. It also helped in creating a climate of

participation and conveyed the view that the students were becoming part of a successful partnership for learning. It also supported the view that 'pupils learn best when they teach others' (McBeath *et al.*, 2007: 42). At the end of the first term, an opportunity arose to have 5 mentors trained as 'cybermentors' for the Beatbullying charity's 'cybermentors' website. This was, in my view, a fantastic privilege. The mentors were selected via an application process and received training with the charity within a few weeks. By the end of this, they were accredited cybermentors who could log on to the site and help those being bullied across the country.

Rewarding the mentors was, to me, an important component in ensuring that mentoring thrived. There were perennial rewards for them in helping others, developing their own skills and having increased responsibility. These rewards, from my point of view, were much more significant than anything tangible that I could reward them with because it was derived from their own work rather than something given by me. However, I did recognise that these students were only 12 years old and experience has taught me that students like to have rewards which are material and measurable. This view was echoed in another teacher's account: 'praise gives them encouragement and self-confidence; stimulates positive attitudes and motivation; helps cognition; makes them feel satisfied; and strengthens the student/teacher relationship' (Lyons, 2007: 18).

It was with this in mind that I ensured that I met with my mentors every week to review how the week had gone and to also check their behaviour points. I established a reward system whereby the mentors were rewarded with 5 merits points if they had no negative behaviour points in that week. This was put in place to encourage them to be positive role models. They were rewarded with an additional 5 merit points if they attended their duty. They also received certificates and prizes for their involvement in Anti-Bullying Week and at the end of the year were recognised and rewarded in the Celebration Assembly with certificates and their favourite chocolate bar. In addition, I wrote letters home to parents praising them for their hard work and organised an end of year trip for them. This succeeded in creating a climate of honesty. They were always eager to show the progress they had made each week and recognising them in assemblies succeeded in increasing their profile among their peers. Recognising them in this way also had a galvanising effect on others in the year group; more students wanted

to know how they could get involved in mentoring and wanted to prove that they could contribute something towards helping others.

I felt it was important to evaluate the impact of mentoring for both the mentors and the mentees so, towards the end of the year I produced a questionnaire for the students to complete. The responses I received back from the mentors and mentees were very positive. It was clear that mentoring had helped the mentees to feel happier in school and developed their skills of reflection and decision-making. It had also helped the mentors to develop their skills and made them feel that they were making a valuable contribution to helping others and improving school life. On reflection, perhaps I should have done more to elicit individual students' views. However, I do feel that in some ways this was not necessary as the nature of mentoring meant that I was continually having conversations with the mentors and mentees, as well as mentor meetings and this meant that a 'participation climate' was being developed and was supporting and valuing their contributions (McBeath *et al.*, 2007).

Even without this data, the impact on the students was clear to see. Students who had come to mentoring at the beginning of the year feeling upset, nervous and lacking confidence were seen, by the end of the year, to be thriving and showed more confidence in making their own decisions and asking for help. I felt incredibly proud of this and even more so of my mentors, who had shown an amazing ability to adapt and learn in difficult situations. When they began mentoring, they were very unsure about what questions to ask and seemed intimidated by mentees who were relying on them for help. As the year progressed they became much more skilled in dealing with issues that were presented to them that it was soon at a point where they required very little input from me in mentoring sessions. It was clear to me that my work was doing much to make progress towards achieving different facets of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (DfES, 2003).

The project also had a positive impact on the students by making them aware and reflective towards their own actions. My mentors wanted to prove themselves as role models and were keen to show me that they had received no negative behaviour points during the week. I also noticed that they exhibited honesty when they had done something wrong by telling me about mistakes they had made and

trying to prove that they were sorry. This showed that they were developing into mature and responsible individuals.

It was also successful in raising the profile of the school. My cybermentors were interviewed on a regional radio show and I ensured that any achievements were publicised via the staff and school newsletters.

The project also had an impact on me. It reaffirmed for me the value in working with students in this way. I felt that I was creating and participating in something which was meaningful to the students. I also derived enjoyment and empowerment from being able to try out ideas without the constraints of the National Curriculum or exam boards, something which has a major impact in my role as Subject Leader of History.

Expanding mentoring

Following the completion of my second project, I knew I wanted to continue with mentoring and build on what I had achieved. One of the problems I had during the previous year was that I was leading and managing mentoring by myself. This proved to be problematic when issues of bullying arose that needed to be dealt with while I was running mentoring sessions. I also found it difficult to balance the demands of mentoring with my other responsibilities in school. I knew that I needed support from others in order for mentoring to be sustained (Bourne, 2007). I found that some staff wanted to get involved and one colleague agreed to help me run mentoring on a regular basis. I met with her early on and agreed our priorities for the year. One of my aims was to try to expand mentoring to work with different schools, as well as building on what had been achieved in school. This was because I had seen the transforming effect that mentoring had exhibited during the previous year and I wanted this work to transcend beyond the boundaries of my own school.

Following my meeting with my colleague, I produced an action plan which aimed to address the issue of expanding mentoring and working with other schools. I started with small things first of all. I then did assemblies for KS3 students with the aim of recruiting more mentors. One of my aims was to try and establish a system where my current mentors (who were now in Year 9) were training new mentors, who were selected from Year 8 and 9, in order to support students across the entire Key Stage, with a particular emphasis on Year 7. I wanted to create more unity between these year groups and

try to foster an environment of harmony and cohesion. I also felt that this was a more powerful way for the mentors to exercise influence over others, and would have more impact than anything I could hope to do (Murphy, 2007).

In addition to this, I made contact with three local primary schools with the aim of using my cybermentors to perform an assembly to the whole school and then do a workshop for a selected group of primary school students. I wanted to create a climate of participation on a much grander scale. One primary school took us up on the offer and I encouraged my mentors to produce all the resources and the assembly themselves so they had ownership over what they were doing. Following our visit to the local primary school, I encouraged the students to evaluate their work so that we could improve for next time.

From March 2011 onwards, my work expanded to involve a number of secondary schools. I was given the contact details of a Senior Teacher at a local secondary school who was looking to set up her mentoring scheme. I contacted her by email and arranged a meeting with her.   I also had discussions with a former colleague who is now an Assistant Principal in another school. She was also keen to set up her own mentoring system after having seen what I had done during the previous academic year. I arranged to meet with her and some of her colleagues to talk through what I had done so far. We then arranged a follow-up visit so she could bring her mentors to observe a mentoring session. In order to evaluate the success of this work, I requested feedback from all three schools. The primary school did not come back to me. However, I received a positive evaluation from the Senior Teacher at the secondary school and my former colleague, referred to above, wrote a letter to my Headteacher praising the work that had been achieved. She also encouraged the students at her school to reflect on what they had learnt. This illustrated an important message about collaboration – by exercising shared values and a shared desire to achieve something in relation to a problem, it becomes much easier to initiate change. It was clear from this contact with different secondary schools that I was beginning to have influence beyond my expectations. I had not planned for this contact with secondary schools and it was a pleasing by-product of my work.

In addition to this work, I sought to build on the success of the first Anti-Bullying Week by trying to get more students involved. I

wanted participation in mentoring to extend beyond the mentors and mentees to encompass the whole school. I used PSHE lessons to encourage students to sign up to 'The Big March' which was organised by the Beatbullying charity; we developed a quiz for form time, continued with the 'Nominate a Positive Role Model' activity and ran an Anti-Bullying stall. I also did another assembly to promote the week. In addition, we developed a number of follow-up activities so students could see the impact of their involvement. I then organised follow-up assemblies several weeks later to reward students for their involvement.

My project has continued to have a positive impact on the students involved. In recruiting new mentors, I wanted to provide an opportunity for young people who had not always proven themselves to be model students. I did this for two reasons: firstly to ensure that the views of all students were being listened to (Rudduck, 2005 in Bourne, 2007) and secondly, to try to give them increased responsibility as a means of developing improved maturity, commitment and reliability (Bourne, 2007). This has worked very successfully and one particularly challenging student proved that he could make changes in his attitude and behaviour in order to make an effective contribution to the school community.

The project also had an impact on me as a leader. I have found it challenging to work with other schools and other members of staff. I have recognised the importance of empowering others as a facet of effective leadership.

Evaluating my development work as a whole

Through the completion of this development work, I was able to identify several key themes running through my projects. Helping students to overcome barriers was one of these themes. I feel that I have been successful in implementing strategies and structures to support students in doing this. When I began my development work, I did not plan for much of what I have achieved. Fullan (1993) argues that 'change is a journey, not a blueprint' and I certainly found this to be the case. I have appreciated the importance of gathering students' views as a means of implementing effective change. Instigating collaboration is not easy, and one of the main barriers I have faced from staff in my school and others is from those who have not always shared the same values and attitudes towards effecting change as me. Leadership has been developed, both in the students and in myself. I have appreciated how powerful and

rewarding the empowerment of students and staff can be. One of the most important lessons I have learnt is that it is vitally important to ensure that you continue to sustain your work in order for it to be effective and meaningful. If mentoring is to grow and flourish in my school it needs to involve all staff and become embedded within school structures and policies. I am proud of the success of my development work and hope it will continue to support and empower many students.

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