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Research Associate Summary Report

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Mentoring: from data to people

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Introduction

Both the personalised learning agenda and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) place at their hearts the needs of the individual student. The perceived need to support students through their social and academic progression in education has perhaps never been so pronounced.

One way in which schools are responding to this demand is through the provision and development of mentoring programmes. This fits most closely within two of the DfES's five components of personalisation (DfES, 2004), namely assessment for learning and school organisation.

Although assessment for learning has its roots in day-to-day classroom practice, effective dialogue between a mentor and student around learning needs links to this. Optimal organisational structures are required to enable this dialogue not only to occur but to make a valid contribution to students' school experience.

This study has sought to evaluate mentoring within a small group of secondary schools. It reflects upon the changed role of form tutors in which they are the first port of call for students and parents, as well as responsible for taking a lead in the development of the individual student. No longer do they seem just to mark registers and check homework diaries; they now reflect upon data to support the learner in ways that have not been common in the past.

As more adults in schools join in the mentoring process, this study aims to reflect on their engagement too. It looks at the adult-student mentoring process, seeking to identify good practice and highlight issues. It offers the viewpoint that, in an age of Every Child Matters and learning beyond the classroom, the focus for mentoring needs to extend beyond academic achievement to one that is more holistic, taking account of students' social development: moving the focus of mentoring from data to people.

The approach

The research was based in five West Country secondary schools, serving some 8,300 students, and was carried out between April and July 2005. Headteachers and pastoral representatives were interviewed from each school, and in one school the views of the whole pastoral management team were also gathered.

Throughout the study, strong emphasis was given to the views gathered from a representative group of students from each school. In one school this student voice was augmented by two online data-gathering exercises, each involving over 500 students.

The meaning of mentoring in this study became 'the interaction between school-employed adults and students, relating to enhancing self-development'.

Key findings

Mentoring means different things to different people and schools.

- School leaders and students held differing views as to what mentoring meant to them. For school leaders, these were based on their past experience, both personally from their own educational background and professionally from their work in education.
- Diverse views were found regarding whether mentoring should be restricted in its definition and application to the academic, ie achievement-focused, or to the holistic, ie the development of the whole child.
- The use of a commonly understood language and definitive vocabulary would aid dialogue, understanding and development.

Academic versus holistic mentoring

- All the study schools had developed academic mentoring systems. These were focused on the use of performance data to improve student performance. Staff used predictive data such as CATs and SATs to undertake short (typically 15-minute) discussion sessions with students.
- In the majority of schools, mentoring had not extended to discussion, target setting or record keeping of non-academic aspects of students' school lives. However, all schools recognised the value of discussions between students and staff beyond the confines of learning, valuing the importance of the whole child.
- All but one of the schools used academic performance data exclusively. The other school showed evidence of combining this with the discussion and recording of non-academic targets.

Creating the right atmosphere and culture for mentoring to occur is an important role of leadership of schools.

- Creating a culture in which its value was promoted was acknowledged to be the most significant contributor to the introduction and development of mentoring in the schools. The role of school leaders was highlighted as the critical factor in the creation of that culture.
- The need for a culture of trust between students and staff was recognised as a prerequisite for mentoring to be effective. Where there was evidence of trust and engagement between student and staff, the mentoring process worked well, with high student satisfaction.

"My tutor is my rock and they give extra advice when needed"

- All the school leaders interviewed were unanimous in their enthusiasm to recognise and respond to the student voice in their schools. Most schools had clearly established structures for this, such as school councils. However, few used this voice to develop existing practice in mentoring. Few also could be clear in identifying how, at student level, mentoring had affected individuals' learning. One school used an online evaluation system to gather students' and parents' views of mentoring.

- All the students interviewed were positive about their relationships with their adult mentors and welcomed the concept of mentoring, but expressed some dissatisfaction with the manner in which it was conducted.

Students need to experience consistency of approach in mentoring.

- Students criticised the inconsistency between subject targets set and grades they subsequently achieved. They were also critical of the very different approaches taken by both the subject and form tutors involved in the process.

"All they (the Tutor) seem to do is set higher and higher targets, he never said 'well done' for reaching them. Every time you get a grade you are expected to get a higher one."

- Disaffected students were recognised by their peers as a key focal group for mentoring, but challenged this as an accepted norm. They saw support staff working with these fellow students and wanted the same approaches applied to support everyone.

"We (the pupils) discuss targets with our form tutors but no-one else knows them."

- The effective communication of data between staff to inform the mentoring process was recognised as a critical challenge for school leaders. Sharing targets set through mentoring processes between staff was identified as key to the consistent support of students. ICT systems were acknowledged to be an effective means of data transfer between staff involved in the mentoring of students.

An extended range of professionals are now engaged in adult-student mentoring.

- All schools reported a higher number of support staff employed than ever before, and that they have an increased involvement in the mentoring process, eg as classroom assistants and specialist pastoral support staff.

"We have trained staff in coaching and made them active listeners. Many of them are none teachers, and they were highly praised by the trainers."

- Evidence was found of mentoring being delivered by specialist external agencies such as the education welfare service, social services and police. Some schools had employed their own staff in these areas and were considering blending traditional roles to create new hybrid posts. Workforce reform was seen as an opportunity to develop mentoring roles, but no consensus was apparent on this, other than that more mentoring was needed and the more staff involved, the better the potential service for the students.

It is necessary to provide professional development to support the establishment of mentoring systems.

- The use of academic performance data was seen by many schools as the primary feature of their mentoring scheme. However, the consistency of practice in this was recognised as varying widely between individual staff. Addressing this through development opportunities was seen as a solution.
- The wealth of data available to schools and mentors created an extensive range of targets for students, staff and schools. It was acknowledged that there was a need to temper this with common sense, to ensure a rationalised system.
- Schools justified the targeting of scarce resources on mentoring, both in training and in staff time, recognising it as an investment that positively impacted on the process itself. Without the consistency that this brought, effective whole school mentoring would be very difficult to achieve.
- Recognition was given that training should include support staff as well as teachers. Evidence was found of support staff taking advantage of courses traditionally only accessed by teachers.
- Enable the assimilation of all new staff into schools, reinforcing culture and practices to support and sustain the mentoring process.
- Develop a clear common language of mentoring that removes ambiguity, promotes consistency and allows informed debate
- Support effective mentoring through ensuring that both students' pastoral and curriculum needs are known to the appropriate staff; and that robust communication systems allow for this.
- Establish a pastoral structure that encourages mentoring and takes advantage of workforce reforms.
- Encourage students to develop and set their own targets, both academic and non-academic, sharing them with all who need to know and are involved with them, through robust information exchange systems.
- Provide opportunities to consult the student voice, using it to evaluate and develop existing mentoring practices as part of the school's self-evaluation measures.
- Involve all adults in the school in the mentoring process and, as leaders, 'walk the talk'.
- Develop opportunities to engage with other professionals within a climate of Every Child Matters to provide mentoring support for students.
- Extend mentoring beyond academic performance to include and value students' social development and other skills and abilities.

Recommendations

The way to the future: 10 suggestions for senior leadership teams.

- Provide professional development opportunities to all staff involved in mentoring students to create effective and consistent practices.

References

- DfES, 2003, *Every Child Matters* (CM5860), Nowich, HMFO
- DfES, 2004, *A National Conversation about Personalised Learning*, London, DfES

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