



12: MENTORING PUPILS OF HIGH ABILITY

What do we mean by mentoring?

When embarking on any consideration of mentoring in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on some definitions.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is as old as Greek mythology itself. Mentor was the wise and trusted friend Odysseus appointed to educate his son. He acted as a counsellor, coach, teacher and surrogate father.

This notion of caring and knowledgeable guidance became part of the British Education system during medieval times in university colleges such as Oxford and Cambridge. Until recently, it remained a strategy used for students in higher education or for the induction of newly qualified teachers.

Mentoring is now used more widely in schools to support pupils and as an approach for school improvement. Programmes are generally targeted at young people at risk of underachievement, exclusion from school or anti-social behaviour. The focus group is often those children in a period of transition; those about to leave school, enter the job market or go on to further education for example.

The Government endorses mentoring as a support strategy. In the White paper "Excellence in Schools" (July 1997) it says "Mentoring of individuals has proved successful in inspiring and motivating young people." As one strand of the Excellence in Cities initiative (DFEE 1999) it sets out to provide learning mentors for those children identified as underachieving or in need of additional support.

Mentoring is a powerful means of sharing knowledge, enthusiasm, expertise, skills, guidance or support.

WHAT IS MENTORING?

- Mentoring is a particular form of counselling. It is a method of conveying knowledge, skills, experience or guidance between individuals, the mentor and mentee. The essence of mentoring is a long term relationship built upon honest exchange and mutual respect. It involves an experienced and trustworthy person guiding a less experienced, usually younger person, to develop and use their abilities and skills.
- The nature of the process will depend on the needs and abilities of those involved.
- The central aim is to empower and develop the confidence and abilities of the mentee.

WHY MENTOR PUPILS OF HIGH ABILITY?

Historically, mentor relationships have played a significant part in the development of exceptional achievement. Research suggests that in almost all cases where individuals reached heights of creative achievements, they received intellectual and spiritual encouragement from an individual who served as a mentor, patron or sponsor.

The basis of high achievement is ability, provision, opportunity, motivation and stamina. We also know that self esteem and achievement correlate highly. Positive self esteem underpins an individual's will to realise their potential.

Over time it is likely that children of high ability may require particular support to develop and nurture their abilities. There is also considerable research to suggest that in addition to intellectual needs, pupils of high ability may have particular social and emotional needs which may need support.

Mentoring is an effective method of addressing all of these needs. Also the fact that some problems may emerge as a result of children of high ability being intellectually 'out of synch.' with their peers means that an older person may be best placed for addressing social, emotional and learning needs.

- **Mentoring as a means of addressing some of the common problems that children of high ability may experience**
 - Difficulties with peers: Bright children are not always accepted among peers; their goals and interests may be different. Mentors can support them by valuing their individuality and providing opportunities for expressing their feelings. They can help them to work out strategies for dealing with peers and give reassurance that "it's OK to be bright"
 - Expectations of teachers and parents: Sometimes parents and teachers wrongly assume that emotional maturity is in step with intellectual ability. Very bright

children sometimes complain that adults expect too much. Mentors can listen to the child's concerns and help them develop a clear perspective.

- Decision making and perfectionism! Some children put themselves under undue pressure. Some may have a wide range of interests and abilities and may need help to prioritise, while others may have unrealistic expectations of themselves and put in too many hours on their work. Mentors can help pupils to make appropriate choices and develop a sense of proportion.
- Intellectual arrogance: Children of high ability may alienate themselves by dismissing the contributions of others. They frequently respond to academic competition but may not be too enthralled with the idea of working with others; especially if they feel it would be more expedient to work alone. Mentors could help them to see the advantages of an open mind and broader perspective, and develop their skills for effective teamwork.
- Feelings of isolation uncertainty and anxiety: differences in intellectual ability, learning styles, interests and emotional involvement in what is happening around them may isolate very bright children. Mentors could help them develop perspective and a positive view of themselves.

➤ **Mentoring as a means of providing stimulating and worthwhile experiences for children of high ability**

In areas such as the sciences, mathematics, the performing arts and sports, where signs of talent are observable at an early age, specific mentoring may be a particularly important provision strategy. The form of the relationship would depend on individual need and it would begin with what the school aged child brings to the relationship:

- Initially the mentor's role might be to encourage the spark of curiosity and provide opportunities to exercise their talent in enjoyable ways. Children of high ability need to share ideas with someone of similar intellectual status who shares a passion and understanding for a subject
- Moving on: the mentor would aim to move the mentee/protégé to a high level of mastery, by providing encouragement, specialised knowledge, honest feedback and appropriate experiences that would stimulate and develop self awareness and knowledge. The ideal mentor at this stage tends to be a highly specialised taskmaster.
- Making their mark: In the late training stages the mentor would share knowledge and ideas, be a positive role model and provide useful contacts and opportunities.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF MENTORING

- Generally a mentor acts as a guide or counsellor in an academic or occupational capacity. The form of the relationship will depend on the needs and circumstances of individuals and aims of the project.

Three main approaches for school aged children are:

- **Academic Mentoring** focusing on learning related issues. Mentors might be teachers, older pupils, students/lecturers from local colleges or universities or practitioners from a particular field of expertise.
- **Holistic Mentoring** focusing on academic and/or social issues. Mentors might be any of the above including individuals with particular counselling and social skills.
- **Occupational Mentoring** focusing on work place related experience and information. Mentors would normally be drawn from the world of work or related interest.

The form that the mentoring takes will be determined by children's needs and the willingness and availability of suitable mentors. Within school it is most frequently run by teachers and trusted adults from the local community. There may be partnerships in place, or could be developed, with industry and universities that could be a resource to draw upon. Summer schools are another possible opportunity worth investigating.

The aims of the project will be determined by the needs of the pupils. The identified area of concern will in turn determine the selection of mentees, mentors, venues and form of the process.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

- A mentoring programme is appropriate when an identified problem is as a result of individual needs. Before getting underway with its organisation there needs to be clarity about why this is the best means of addressing the problem.
- Mentoring is based on a one to one relationship and is therefore an expensive provision option. It should be based on clear aims and objectives so that it is obvious to those taking part why it is being organised and what it seeks to achieve.

When the need for mentoring has been agreed:

- Identify the target group
- Establish the project aims and objectives - be clear about perceived benefits to mentees and mentors.

- Establish resources required - information, guidelines, training and contacts
 - Identify project funding
 - Plan management structures and time frames
 - Plan evaluation and feedback procedures.
- A clear sense of purpose should underpin a planned approach to setting up the project. Mentors recruited from in or outside school will require training. They may be teachers in schools or higher education, or individuals drawn from a wide range of work or experience. Whoever they are, it is vital they understand the rationale, process and planned outcomes. Mentors must have appropriate knowledge and skills. Ideally, the mentor should be seen as a friend, counsellor and advisor to whom their mentee can turn to for support.
- At the outset it is also important to consider how parents, staff and other children not taking part in the project will be informed of the programme.
- During meetings with their mentees, mentors must give unambiguous feedback. They need to make a note of any action expected from the pupil and keep records of meetings. It is helpful if the mentor and mentee have written information and guidelines about the organisation and aims of the project. These should give details of the process and what is expected from each person. They will need to refer to these over time.
- It is important that if the relationship is not working, or circumstances are such that it is inappropriate to continue, neither party should feel obliged to persevere with it. Within the process there should be planned exit strategies for pupils and mentors.
- A co-ordinator should be appointed whose role it is to monitor the progress of the programme. The co-ordinator should get feedback from the mentee and mentor regarding the running of the programme and review the project goals over time.

KEY ISSUES

The key issues are those of cost, effectiveness and relevance to pupils of high ability.

- Mentoring is essentially a one to one relationship that is expensive in terms of time and commitment. A project run on good will alone may not necessarily succeed. If schools want teachers to be mentors, this aspect must be addressed. Time needs to be made available for mentoring to take place.
- Research points to the fact that those of exceptional talent and achievement benefit from this form of guidance.

- There is strong evidence also that young people of high ability have needs which may require individual guidance, inspiration, skills, experience or support that a mentor could provide.

Our future lies with the children of today. Young people of exceptional ability and talent have enormous potential for shaping and improving the world in which we live. It is vital that we encourage and nurture these youngsters and address their particular needs. Mentoring is a powerful method of inspiring, guiding and supporting individuals. This strategy is one method that may be appropriate for helping some bright children realise their immense potential; to benefit both themselves and the society within which they belong.

RECOMMENDED READING

The National Mentoring Network, First Floor, Charles House, Albert Street, Eccles, Manchester, M30 0PD. Tel:0161 787 8600 Fax: 0161 787 8555
E mail:natment@globalnet.co.uk

The DIVERT Trust. 33 King Street, London WC2E 8JD. Tel: 020 73796171 Fax: 020 7240 2082. E mail: info@divert.org <http://www.divert.org>

Fitzpatrick, M & Cox, E *Mentoring Gifted and Talented Children in Four Primary Schools in Oxfordshire* (unpublished)

HYPERLINK to *Mentoring Gifted and Talented Children in Four Primary Schools in Oxfordshire* – Resource Base

Freeman, J (1998). Mentoring Gifted Pupils, in S Goodlad (Ed.) *Mentoring and Tutoring by Students*. p. 217-228. London: Sterling.

Freeman, J (1 998). *Educating the Very Able*, Current International Research. OFSTED London: The Stationery Office.

Zorman, Rachel (1993). *Mentoring and Role Modeling Programs for the Gifted*, International Handbook of Research and Development of Giftedness and Talent. Pergamon Press.