

Raising educational aspirations of students from deprived backgrounds? Evaluating a student-mentoring scheme

Introduction:

The educational under achievement of working-class boys remains a key public and policy challenge in the UK, fuelled by anxieties about the failure of schools to effectively connect and engage with pupils and the particular ways working-class boys resist schooling (Ingram, 2009). It is in this context that a student-mentoring scheme was established and implemented, by a senior member of staff at a school in Lincoln, with the key aim of promoting the educational success and aspirations of working-class boys in the locality.

Piloted in the 2017-2018 academic year, the scheme focused on boys between year 7 and year 9, who were perceived as underachieving in their subjects. Undergraduate students from the University of Lincoln, studying a range of academic degrees, were recruited and trained to be volunteer mentors for the identified boys.

In July 2018, a team of researchers from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln, funded under the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme (UROS), undertook an evaluation of the student-mentoring scheme, finding that it had benefited the boys it had engaged, but also identifying areas for improvement.



Methods:

The aim of the evaluation was to critically examine the student-mentoring scheme, by generating and analysing information about the qualities of its main activities, characteristics and outcomes. This focused in particular on the use of Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), a system which generates learning profiles, measuring and improving learning. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key individuals involved in implementing and delivering the mentoring scheme, and the boys it was delivered to. This included:

- Two senior members of staff at the school, who implemented the project, to understand the rationale of the scheme and how it was run.
- Three student mentors, in order to understand their motivations for engaging in the scheme and their experiences.
- Two focus groups, as well as individual interviews with two boys taking part in the scheme, to understand their experiences, their educational biographies and their future aspirations.
- A control group of two students, one who didn't take part in the scheme, and one that joined half way through the process.

The research team worked collaboratively to generate and develop themes across the dataset, in order to develop in-depth and contextualised insights about the mentoring scheme, and its value for those involved.

Findings and Recommendations:

After a full analysis of the findings by all members of the research team, the following findings and recommendations are offered in order to formalize the mentoring scheme and underpin future iterations.

- It was highlighted by a senior member of staff at the school, that between year 7 and 9, some boys from deprived backgrounds, start to convince themselves that school has no real life value, and "fall out of love with education". This is why the student-mentoring scheme was created, in order to raise the boy's educational aspirations, and change the way they feel about school.
- It was also found that, although the mentors' training was very comprehensive, they wanted more guidance about how to support the boys with behavioral, social and academic skills and what the school can offer in terms of holistic support. It was also found that, to ensure consistency in the way they are trained, the mentors would prefer delivery to the entire group of volunteers on specific dates.
- Safeguarding and the importance of boundaries was discussed with mentors in great detail during their training, but they felt they would benefit from understanding the degree of flexibility they have for discussing the more personal aspects of the boys' lives. A set of guidelines might be developed that identifies 'safe' and 'unsafe' topics.
- The mentors felt compelled to adopt a mentoring style that reflected a tutoring relationship, focused predominantly on study skills. While important, mentoring should also offer a safe space for boys to share information about their hobbies and wider interests beyond school.
- Mentors felt they would benefit from clear aims and objectives for each session. The provision of an adaptable structure and toolbox of activities for each session, tailored to the boys' year group, could help mentors to build confidence, and ensure focus on the mentoring relationship.
- Some of the boys taking part in the mentoring scheme had hoped it would change their perspective of school and learning, but they felt it didn't. They suggested sessions that alternated structured work with fun activities, in order to help them improve in the subjects they don't like.
- Other students felt they were being "heard" during their mentoring sessions, and saw an improvement in their own work and in their confidence. This is an extremely positive finding, showing that the scheme worked for some of the students. However it once again highlights the need for consistency in the training of the mentors, and the structure of each session, to ensure that all students benefit from taking part.

Conclusion:

The above findings suggest that the mentoring scheme had some value for the boys, including providing a safe, independent space for them to reflect on their educational experiences, to explore some of the challenges they face, and to consider possible solutions. It has also encouraged some of the boys to think about their potential and what they need to do in order to achieve their future goals.



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