



Using Assertive Mentoring to counter laddishness

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Aim of the project

The study set out to explore the effects of a particular style of mentoring that aims to tackle issues of 'laddishness' and 'macho' image. It set out to provide ways for the students to opt out of laddish behaviour (prevalent amongst some girls as well as lads) without threatening their status in the eyes of their peers.

Dimensions of the study

The study was carried out at Hurworth School; an 11-16 comprehensive in Darlington with 650 students on roll. The students come from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds with the majority arriving by bus mostly from the council estates in Darlington, some of which are amongst the most deprived in the country. Our school took part in action research led by Mike Younger and Molly Warrington (see below). Schools from neighbouring LAs worked with us to customise our systems and approaches for use in their own schools.

Summary of main findings

In 2007, 96% of students achieved 5+ GCSE A*-Cs (81% including English and Maths) and the school's KS3 level 5+. SAT scores are now consistently around the 90% mark. The DCSF's 2007 KS2-4 contextualised value added (CVA) scores ranked the school 32nd in the country. What was a low performing school in the mid-1990s, is now one of today's top performers nationally. In addition the school's gender gap has disappeared.

Background and context

The school had an unexceptional achievement profile throughout much of the 1990s. In 1998 just 38% of students achieved 5+ GCSE A*-Cs and around 65% achieved level 5+ at the end of KS3. Between 2001 and 2004, a DCSF-sponsored team from Cambridge University conducted some action research into the exceptional improvements in performance seen at Hurworth School. They concluded that the single most significant factor in the school's extraordinary transformation had been the introduction of a number of systems collectively referred to as Assertive Mentoring (AM). The AM strategy was designed by Eamonn Farrar, the Chief Executive of Hurworth Comprehensive School, and the Head Teacher, Dean Judson.

Teaching processes and strategies: Assertive Mentoring

The AM strategy aimed to engage under-achievers in their own learning and in doing so support them in adopting ways of opting out of laddish behaviour without threatening their status in the eyes of their peers. The strategies used included student target setting, tracking, mentoring, intervention and review.

1. Student target setting

At the very beginning of Year 7 and Year 10, the *Senior Leadership Team* (SLT) calculate end of Key Stage target levels or grades for each subject using a formula which adds value to each student's most recent SAT scores. These are given to teachers who are encouraged to change their students' targets *upwards*, but they are not allowed to revise them *downwards*. The rule is that the under-achiever is *pulled up* towards the aspirational targets. Targets are never revised downwards towards the under-achiever.

2. Tracking progress against the targets

There are pre-scheduled times throughout the Key Stage where teachers and students agree levels or grades based on the students' current quality of work and effort. Teachers must justify their judgements to their heads of departments who, once satisfied, enter the predicted levels/grades onto an electronic departmental spreadsheet. Departmental data is then transferred onto a central spreadsheet and the Assertive Mentoring Senior Leader (AMSL) interrogates it and challenges HODs where appropriate. Tracking increases in frequency the closer students get to public examinations. In Years 9 and 11 it is monthly.

For the last seven years, the school's final April GCSE 5+ A*-C predictions have never been more than 1% out when the actual results are published! This means that the school can tell its students at the beginning of the GCSE course for example, with absolute confidence, that if they 'play ball' there will be no shocks on results day. This is a very powerful motivational tool.

3. Assigning mentors

All students in both Key Stages are assigned mentors. Mentors use the predictive data to challenge their mentees. Crucial to the effectiveness of mentoring is its assertive style. It is not simply a cosy chat as was the case with the school's earlier soft mentoring systems. Students are made to feel aware that the regular one-to-one conversations with their mentors are evidence driven, business like and have direct benefits.

The gap between predicted grades and target grades is identified in the mentoring meeting. Appropriate interventions are designed to break down students' barriers to learning. Mentors check to ensure they are implemented and that they are having the desired impact. If the intervention doesn't work, students are seen again by mentors and new interventions agreed. Students are not allowed to give up on themselves.

The process of selecting mentors identifies staff with the characteristics the school is looking for in its mentors – lots of common sense; respected; able to relate well to people; good

communicators; good problem-solvers and hard workers! But ongoing training and guidance are provided to mentors (see below).

How are teachers trained to be mentors?

Hurworth's assertive mentors are trained to use six 'Key Principles of Influence' to get under-achievers to change their attitudes and, by doing so, their attainment. Our use of the six principles of influence is based upon the work of Robert Cialdini's collection of psychology research. His six principles were used by mentors on students who had not been responding well to existing mentoring styles and approaches.

The six principles are:

- Reciprocity, i.e. obliging a student to return a 'favour'
- Social proof, i.e. drawing students' attention to good things others are doing
- Authority, i.e. using your authority as an 'expert' to create a leadership position in the relationship
- Liking, i.e. helping to encourage positive friendships among students
- Consistency, i.e. getting the student to commit and encouraging loyalty to you
- Scarcity, i.e. highlighting the special value of the mentor-mentee relationship

Eamonn Farrar's book 'A Guide for Assertive Mentors' contains 6 case studies that show how each of the principles has been used with great success with specific and challenging students. The book describes how the principles can be used with any student. Each member of staff has one of these booklets for personal use.

What effect did assertive mentoring have on students?

Below are two case studies showing how specific AM strategies have been successfully deployed.

How did RECIPROCITY help Gus?

Gus was a laddish character in Year 10. He messed around in lessons if he got the chance but nothing too serious. This occurred when he became frustrated; normally when, in his view, the teacher was 'boring', or the teacher 'picked on him' etc... then he could be a 'real handful'.

In a mentoring session, Gus revealed his frustrations with his Maths teacher's continued negative expectations of him. He thought the teacher was mocking him. He explained his frustrations with the apparently irrelevant and boring lessons. Gus said he couldn't do Maths, and that was his teacher's view. He said that lessons were dominated by teacher talk and worksheets. Discipline systems meant little to him. Worst of all, there was a lack of opportunity for him to talk in lessons which he saw as "torturous". He admitted he was seriously under-achieving – he'd switched off, and said that there was no chance of the situation changing.

Actions

The mentor gave Gus a 'get out of jail free' card for Maths only. This gave him permission to remove himself from confrontation rather than to 'kick off' with the teacher in the classroom. He was to seek out his mentor to whom he could 'sound off' in private over his frustrations. His mentor approached his teacher in order to 'broker this deal', and to get the teacher to see the student's perspective, but, crucially, without undermining the teacher's position.



The mentor suggested the use of a number of other strategies the teacher could employ in the classroom. Strategies that Gus and others in the class would respond to positively, e.g. more Maths challenges in lessons, friendly competitiveness, and rewards linked to performance. The mentor worked with the teacher on these. Gus valued the obvious efforts of the school to put things right. In return he promised to "give it a go".

Gus's mentor told him that in return for improved Maths grade predictions from his teacher, he would be rewarded. 'No change', however, would trigger sanctions. Sanctions and rewards were negotiated with the student beforehand. The sanction was the removal of the 'get out of jail free' card. As a reward, Gus was told that he could take part in school trips/fun activities which are run at the end of every term. Previously he had to stay in school to work because of his lack of progress.

Results

Gus was not flaring up in lessons. This had a calming impact on the others in the class. The Maths teacher saw Gus and the others responding better. The 'deal brokering' was working.

Teaching became easier and the teacher became more ambitious in his teaching. Gus and the others responded well. Gus saw himself "getting somewhere". He tried harder and his predicted GCSE grade improved.

Convinced that the mentor was working for him, Gus was even prepared to accept that his Maths teacher might have a "different and more legitimate view" of a situation than he did; and he was therefore prepared to accept the outcomes of negotiation between mentor and teacher. This represented quite a shift in attitude. In June of Year 10 Gus had been predicted by his Maths teacher to get an E grade in the GCSE. He actually achieved a B grade in the 'real' GCSE. This was at the upper end of the Fisher Family Trust (FFT) predicted range for Gus.

How did AUTHORITY help Danny?

Danny was an under-achieving Year 11 student. Cognitive ability tests on entry showed that he was a very able boy, but his performances in National Curriculum tests at 14 were disappointing; and his teachers had set him relatively low GCSE targets as a result.

He suffered from an utter lack of realism. He disagreed with his teachers' judgements that he wasn't working hard enough although he would reluctantly admit he "could probably do a bit more". However, more work would 'impinge upon his social life', so he wasn't keen. His parents were quite "relaxed" about his under-achievement.

He was very conscious of hierarchies within his peer group. He deferred to those peers he thought to be his 'superior', and he expected those lower in the pecking order to defer to him.

As an under-achieving student he had a mentor, but he saw the mentor as a junior member of staff and placed little importance on mentoring meetings. The mentor worked hard to help Danny but he was unmoved and unmotivated. Danny wasn't making progress.

Danny envied his friends whose mentor was a young Deputy Head. The Deputy Head was in charge of Raising Achievement. Teachers and students saw him as an important authority figure who was known to have been given the absolute backing of the Head. The Deputy noticed that Danny was making little progress through mentoring and became his mentor. Danny said he was pleased he was "under the wing" of the Deputy.

The Deputy suggested Danny 'use' his mentor's authority over him to justify to his peers his sudden involvement in academic work. Danny was happy with this deal. Coming from this senior authority figure, Danny knew his mates would 'back off'. It enabled him to address issues of image and group credibility. He was given an escape route from the need to conform to a laddish macho image.

Results

Danny's response to this key authority figure was amazing. He valued the positive feedback and the approval of his new mentor. He boasted about this to his mates and at home. The appointment of the Deputy as Danny's mentor gave him a sense of importance. Danny said, "I couldn't believe how much time he gave to me. That was great coming from someone as important and busy as him".

Mentoring meetings established some feeling of equality between mentor and Danny but there was a clear understanding that the relationship had a latent power balance within it. Danny was in no doubt who was in charge. He remembers one conversation

his mentor had with him: "Your teacher of 20 years experience tells me you're on course for an E grade in this subject Danny... so whether you think you're going to get a B grade is irrelevant! Her experience and mine is telling you that unless you change your attitude, approach, work rate, you're in for a shock...it's no B you're looking at, trust me on that one!"

Danny was stunned on results day. He'd achieved 8 C+ GCSE passes.

Research methods

The data collected were predictive. Teachers were asked to say, monthly, if predicted outcomes for the targeted students had improved following the use of the new approaches.

Conclusion

Once implemented, internal monthly tracking showed that even the most challenging of students could be moved on. The outputs showed clear improvements for all students. Some movements were dramatic. Since mentors began to be aware of the principles of influence and use them systematically, teachers have adopted them for everyday classroom use. This has required specific training.

Suggestions for further reading

Mike Younger and Molly Warrington's 'Raising Boys' Achievement in Secondary Schools' (2005). The book was written following extensive action research in several schools which appeared to be doing something quite dramatic in both 'raising the bar' and closing the gender gap.

Author's contact details

Eamonn Farrar is the Chief Executive of Hurworth Comprehensive School in Darlington. He and the Head Teacher, Dean Judson, developed the school's unique systems of mentoring.



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All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

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