

Gavin Jinks describes an innovative student-mentoring programme, which has had far wider-ranging benefits than expected.

Self-belief in education

MY sister was a teacher, then a headteacher, then a school inspector. She was part of the inspection team for a primary school in the south of England that had been designated “a cause for concern” by the local authority; it was a failing school. She registered her interest in returning to a headteacher role and wanted the opportunity to turn the school around.

This was no small ambition because the school was in an area of high social deprivation and had multiple problems. Not least among these problems was the sheer number of first languages spoken by the children (32) and the transient nature of the school population, over 40 per cent turnover per year. She was appointed as head and, within a year, Ofsted deemed the school to be satisfactory and improving; five years later it rated it as good. (Given the demographics it would have been nigh on impossible for it to be rated outstanding, the best Ofsted option.) When I visited my sister for the weekend recently, we were discussing what had been achieved there. In her opinion, the number one predictor of success or otherwise for any child in the education system is the extent to which the child, by whatever means, comes to believe in their own potential. (See “Raising expectations at a failing school”, page 36.)

Why do I begin with this story? Simply because it reflects what I have come to believe myself in my own role as a senior lecturer in applied social work at the University of Derby. Belief is everything, whether you’re a child at school, an adult in higher education or just about anybody. Developing students’ self-belief has gradually become my underpinning philosophy and, in particular, has underpinned my approach to a student-mentoring project.

The power of placebo

I vividly recall being told about the power of placebo when I was first studying the human givens approach nearly two decades ago. I was highly struck by the evidence to support the idea that a placebo is a powerful ‘drug’ and that people often change or become well because they have become convinced that the ‘treatment’ will make them better. This was part of a wider set of ideas I learned through the human givens approach about the uses and misuses of the imagination; harnessing the power of the imagination to create positive change may well be to harness nature’s single greatest therapeutic

and educational tool. I have come to the view that self-belief or lack of it works in the same way as placebo: those that expect to succeed tend to succeed, and those that expect to fail tend to fail.

One of my responsibilities as a senior lecturer is that I am the member of staff with overall responsibility for induction of new students to the applied social work programme, as well as for their welfare and development during the first year of their studies. Back in 2015, I was keen to add another strand to the various layers and sources of support available to students. I was aware that student mentoring of students was undertaken in a number of universities, including our own, as well as in schools, so I decided to give the idea a go.

Starting small

Initially I recruited only five student mentors, people who were both highly engaged in their studies and also achieving very well academically. They were added to a Year 1 Facebook group (which I had introduced earlier), allowing students to contact them over any issues about which they would rather seek the counsel of their peers than that of their tutors – this ranged from advice on key reading material to where to park their cars. The mentors were also contactable by email and, importantly, they led a session in person during induction week on “Things I Wish I’d Known on Day 1” (more on that later).

Fast forward to 2018 and the project has grown significantly. For the first time, in the 2018/2019 academic year, mentor support will be available to students on all three years of the programme, with over 40 student mentors in all. Thus each year group will have a Facebook group involving mentors from the year above, with, in the case of those in their final year, mentoring provided by willing former students who have moved into professional practice.

Importantly, I do not oversee any of these groups. I now recruit mentors on the basis of engagement with the programme rather than high academic achievement – people who clearly really love and value the course, even though, in some cases, they struggle to get the highest marks. It may often be these students to whom others will relate more easily, especially if they view high achievers as out of their own league. I also invite students approaching the end of their first year to nominate fellow students to



become next year's mentors, telling them that, while I have a number of people in mind, I am also open to hearing their own recommendations. I am keen to embed the message that their opinions and experience really matter. And, indeed, I tend to find that three or four people get flagged up whom I would have missed.

Another popular innovation is that mentors who have been highly successful in their own academic assignments provide guidance to students undertaking assignments in those subjects the following year. So, for every module I teach, there will be one session towards the end where I invite these students who excelled the previous year to explain specifically how they approached their assignment task. Other lecturers have now started to introduce this practice, too.

During induction week, the majority of the input now comes from student mentors. I don't attend this. Instead, I introduce the mentors and say that I won't be present, as I trust the mentors to say what they think will be helpful and that I don't want the new students to feel constrained in what they ask (perhaps fearing their question will seem daft to a member of staff – and having their card marked before even starting). This goes down well, as the students can feel assured that what they are going to be hearing will be the truth, not a sanitised version stage managed by me. The mentors, in turn, really appreciate feeling trusted.

Things I wish I'd known on day 1

The very popular session on "Things I Wish I'd Known on Day 1" explores a variety of issues, ranging from what particular lecturers look for in essays to how to cope with changed relationships at home. The latter topic surprises some new students. However, it is impossible to study applied social work without being obliged to question all your own assumptions and beliefs – about stereotypes, for instance, and unrecognised prejudices. Commonly, students find that, while their own attitudes start changing, those of partners, parents or teenage children do not. It helps to recognise that this might be why conflicts arise where previously they didn't, and be ready to address this.

Partnership

The development of the project has been organic and at its core is the philosophy of partnership between the mentors and me. We have shared the decision making, meeting together every three months or so to review what is and is not working. For instance, the idea of allocating a mentor to attend each tutor group turned out not to be feasible because of timetable clashes. On the other hand, the Facebook groups are agreed to be a phenomenal success. The mentors keenly propose new ideas for how we move forward; one such suggestion this year was the creation of a resource pack for new students, and there are discussions about creating mentor-led

study groups. Whenever we review the project, the words of Steve De Shazer, a founder of solution-focused therapy, are never too far from my mind: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Once you know what works, do more of it. If it's not working, do something different." At the recent Derby University Union of Students Awards, of all the initiatives in the university where students take on a role or responsibility this was judged to have been the most successful.

Spreading the word

This is all generating more interest and, every time that I am approached by academics from other disciplines about the project, I tell them that they can speak to the mentors themselves. As well as letting those academics develop a fuller idea of how the project works, it also affirms the mentors by giving them responsibility for spreading the word. They are truly treated as equals. Yet, when I gave a presentation on the project at the International Conference for Education Research and Innovation in Seville in 2017 and at the UK Advising and Tutoring Conference earlier this year, a great many of the questions asked at the end were based on the assumption that I (as representative of the university) had imposed a model of student mentoring and also that it was fixed. People are always surprised about the shared decision making and that we will keep changing and developing the project, based on our discussions and reviews.

One of my own key messages to interested parties from within the university and from other institutions is that each programme needs to create a project suited to its own subject and the needs of its own students. Relatively few students come onto the social work course straight from school, as most will have worked in some area of social care first, while some have already had successful careers in other sectors. We thus tend to attract a dedicated cohort of students and there is a highly practical focus. Students may most value the input of mentors in helping them access and handle practice placements. It would be ridiculous to assume, then, that the way we run our mentoring project would be the ideal model for a creative dance programme. I have long believed that universities tend to have an over-developed 'one size fits all' approach to many of their initiatives, and this is one of the ways in which I challenge this.

What you expect...

Way back in the 1960s, Robert Rosenthal carried out a controversial experiment in which he told teachers at the start of an academic year that certain of the students they were about to teach were either particularly high achieving or below average. Unsurprisingly to us now, the results at the end of the year reflected the information that the teachers had been given, when the truth was that the students had been randomly selected. He concluded that the outcomes for students



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Raising expectations at a failing school

MOST of the theories, strategies and proposals put forward as solutions to the problems of underachievement are apt to address the practical aspects of teaching, ie the content and the means of delivery, or deal with questions about how to compensate for the deficits of learners. Rarely do the suggested approaches focus on the disposition of learners, in particular their confidence and aspirations, which, in my view, determine success or failure and are, therefore, of fundamental importance to teachers.

I am convinced that, to be successful in any endeavour, individuals have to commit to the objective in two ways; they have to want it, so in other words it has to be relevant and important to them, but they also have to believe that they can be successful. It goes without saying that their belief in their own ability to achieve has to be realistic, and this is where I believe the teacher comes in. Good teaching is, first and foremost, about good judgement, ie recognising what learners are capable of without putting caps on their achievement or nurturing inaccessible goals and dreams, and then empowering learners by elevating and sponsoring their aspirations and enabling them to acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills they need.

I have worked in contexts where teachers have had to do little to develop and nurture children's self-belief and confidence because it was already there in spades, usually because their family and/or social group set high expectations, nurtured their hopes and supported their goals. In most cases, those children achieved very well even when the teaching they received was dull and uninspiring.

I have also worked in contexts where skilful teachers have worked incredibly hard and provided well-focused personalised teaching and support but with less success because of the paucity of children's aspirations and lack of self-belief. This has confirmed my view that teachers and teacher educators must ensure that their learners, be they adults or children, believe that

they can succeed and, if they don't, then do something about it.

More than ever now, school leaders are under pressure to meet external targets and, sadly, this can diminish their confidence to prioritise the development of high self-esteem and personal autonomy in their staff and students. It is generally the case that, when compliant individuals have few opportunities to make choices and develop personal autonomy, they cease to believe in their own ability and come to expect and seek directives. Money is being thrown at schools nationally to compensate for disadvantage and they are being expected to use it effectively and account in detail for its use and the outcomes for students. It's not difficult to show spending on booster sessions and intervention programmes, but it is much harder to account for what is needed to raise a student's aspirations or to demonstrate an increase in a person's sense of self-worth and the impact that has on their achievements.

An unexpected priority

When I became head of a school 'in challenging circumstances' I received a lot of advice about what I should do, some of it from experienced professional advisers and some from school stakeholders. Suggestions and proposals varied, with the advice from professionals focusing on raising pupils' attainment, and people within the school counselling me to improve pupils' behaviour. I am not a tree-hugger and I suppose most people would describe me as straight talking, realistic and practical, so it was a surprise to many when I told them that my first priority was to build self-esteem and raise expectations and aspirations.

I didn't go into details but I wasn't just talking about the aspirations of pupils; I meant those of the whole school community. I knew that many pupils were underachieving and results had to improve and I was well aware that standards of behaviour were unacceptable but also that there could be no quick fixes. If there was to be long-term sustainable improvement in this school, then pupils, parents

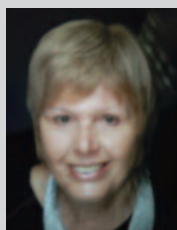
were very significantly linked to the expectations of their teachers: "When teachers expect students to do well ... they do."¹

Rosenthal's methods raised genuine ethical concerns but these conclusions certainly match my own experience. If I had imposed a model, if I had made all the decisions and if I had insisted on overseeing all the input, it would not have been the same project. None of the mentors has

ever felt their tasks to be onerous nor have they ever wanted to be remunerated financially, as this would completely change the dynamic. Indeed, as an entire folder in my mailbox shows, their remuneration comes in more meaningful forms. These are just some of their comments:

"The fact that you trusted me to be a mentor made me feel valued, and changed how I think about myself." (Year 2 mentor)

and staff needed to believe that success was possible. Individuals needed to know it was safe to have ambitions and, collectively, the school community needed to believe in its ability to become a good school.



Denise Harber

I was told that I should start by tackling issues in mathematics because that was the weakest area. However, it was exactly because it was so weak that I didn't start there. Teachers were least confident about teaching maths; children listed it as the least enjoyable thing about school and standards were low. I didn't begin there because I knew that even beginning to tackle this issue properly would take time and I strongly believed that people needed real success, quickly, and they wouldn't get it if I started with maths. They deserved better than to be told they were doing a good job or were brilliant at something when they knew they weren't.

So, because the children and adults alike loved stories and many could act out a good tale and also because the English subject leader was an excellent teacher who had the respect of all her colleagues, I decided to focus on raising standards in writing. People told me I was mad because of the significant number of children in school that couldn't even speak English, let alone write it. I also decided to work on music because everyone seemed to love it – there was a very talented music teacher and the children's singing was simply glorious. In addition, I wanted the outside areas of the school to be places in which teachers wanted to teach and children wanted to learn and play.

I appointed a temporary leadership team and, to their surprise, delegated responsibility for different areas of school leadership to each of them. I didn't interfere even if they didn't do things as I would have. Amid howls of objection I also introduced a daily staff briefing session at 8.30 am, to improve communication and develop a corporate identity. I insisted that all children had the opportunity to write at length once a week, (which meant ditching the hour long lesson formula for at least one day a week), and I asked teachers to help children to assess their own work and identify their next steps and goals.

'Top table' treat

I introduced a twice-weekly whole school assembly, bought new playground equipment, and enlisted key people to help me set up a gardening club, an art club and a drama club. I bribed adults to eat lunch in the hall with children and I tasked teachers to nominate children who had behaved well during the week to be invited to Friday's 'top table', which sported table cloth, napkins, posh crockery and flowers. I also persuaded the premises manager to stop smearing the perimeter fence with thick, black anti-vandal paint and to take down the signs which promised dire consequences to trespassers.

I made several mistakes, mainly of omission, and I didn't immediately insist on some changes in the organisation of staffing and school routines that I knew were necessary but, despite this, there were perceptible signs of a growth in individual and corporate confidence almost immediately. Teachers began to make suggestions and proffer solutions instead of telling me about problems; there were objections when I had to cancel a couple of morning briefing sessions; children demonstrated enthusiasm for 'big writing'; and, to the surprise of adults, assemblies were popular with children. Whilst some six pupils continued to guard their reputation as the enemy, pupils' behaviour improved.

It certainly wasn't all plain sailing; there were many storms and stills, and it was five years before the school was officially judged to be a 'good' school. However, I knew that when the staff pantomime for pupils was hailed as the 'highlight of Christmas', when the CD album which included songs by the children and the 'staff choir' was a sell-out, when the Year 6 production of *Joseph* was described as 'a triumph', when almost every parent came to see the end-of-year art exhibition, when the school got a medal from South East in Bloom for the school grounds and when Year 5 and 6 pupils came back from seeing *The Magic Flute* at Glyndbourne attempting to sing the famous aria sung by The Queen of the Night, I knew that the school was doing what schools should do – that is, to develop the self-esteem of their members in order to raise their expectations of themselves and to strive to enable everyone in the school community to fulfil his or her potential. ●

"Being given responsibility to create input for induction week has helped develop my sense of what it is to be a professional in training." (Year 3 mentor)

"Being asked to be a mentor made me realise that you believed in me. And that meant that I could start to believe in me too." (Year 2 mentor)

So, although my initial intention had been to create an extra layer of support to year 1 stu-

dents, I have discovered that the mentors have taken as much from the project as the mentees. The willingness to help others and the enthusiasm they have shown for the project has been nothing short of staggering. There is another echo here to ideas I first learned about through human givens: if you treat people as if they are competent, the more likely they are to behave competently. ■

REFERENCE

- Rosenthal, R and Jacobson, L (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. The Urban Review, 3: 16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02322211>