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Mentoring troubled pupils as a means for promoting citizenship, identity and community cohesion

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how the mentoring of troubled pupils can contribute to their civic engagement, the development of a more positive personal identity, and make a contribution to community cohesion. It will be argued that mentoring schemes, particularly those which draw upon the principles and practice of social pedagogy in order to empower pupils and promote social inclusion, can promote such pupils' personal development and help them to remain engaged in schooling. In particular, the mentor can make use of within school and out of school schemes which involve civic engagement to enable the pupils to take part in activities which contribute to their local community and to community cohesion. A particularly important feature of such mentoring schemes is that the troubled pupil works as part of a social group which is working collectively, in effect as good citizens, to bring about worthy ends.

Keywords: *Civic engagement, mentoring, troubled pupils*

Introduction

One of the major challenges facing secondary schools is how best to support those pupils who for one reason or another can be described as troubled, vulnerable or disaffected. In many schools the mentoring of such pupils has been used to support and encourage the pupil's engagement with schooling. This paper considers how such mentoring of troubled pupils can promote citizenship, the development of a more positive personal identity, and make a contribution to community cohesion.

Being troubled

Pupils may be identified as troubled for a variety of reasons. The initial identification may be triggered by concerns about the pupil's academic progress, engagement in school work, social behaviour or general well-being. The different types of concerns which commonly feature in the research literature regarding troubled pupils are shown in table 1 (Kyriacou, 2003; Kyriacou et al, 2012). The key factor in such cases is the perception by the school that not all is going well for the pupil and that the pupil requires additional support in order for their troubled circumstances not to lead to marked under-achievement and an undermining of the pupil's self-esteem.

Table 1: Common areas of concern in schools for pupils identified as troubled

Poor literacy and numeracy skills	Feels excluded from society
Bullying and being bullied	Lacks social skills, does not socialise
Pupil misbehaviour	Unhappy, worries, does not enjoy life
Disaffection with school work	Medical care problems
Truancy	Unhealthy life style
Poor career plans and aspirations	Mental health problems
Poor grades in school	Physical health problems
Victim of child abuse and lack of care	Involvement in gang crime
Anti-social and immoral behaviour	Alcohol and drug abuse

Being ‘troubled’ during the secondary school years can have a major negative impact on pupils’ academic attainment, sense of self-worth, social inclusion, and opportunities for future employability, training and further education. The key tasks facing schools in supporting troubled pupils involves considering the pupils’ needs in four areas: (i) how the pupil views himself/herself and whether there is a need to build up their self-esteem and enhance their sense of positive self-identity; (ii) the pupil’s social behaviour and how they relate to others; (iii) their practical needs both within the school and outside the school; and (iv) their engagement with schooling and academic progress. Efforts to support and secure pupils’ engagement in schooling within a context of considering their wider needs during their troubled circumstances can do much to enhance their future life chances and quality of life.

Mentoring

Mentoring is viewed here as a relationship between an adult mentor and a troubled child (the mentee) through which the mentor provides one-to-one advice, guidance and support. There are a host of different types of mentoring schemes in operation which involve unpaid volunteers and paid professionals. The former typically includes university students, charity volunteers, young professionals, and older pupils, whilst the latter typically includes teachers, learning mentors, youth workers and social workers. Mentoring schemes vary enormously in terms of their key purposes, the length of time the mentoring is agreed to last, how the troubled pupil (the mentee) is involved in the scheme and matched with their mentor, and the type of training the mentor receives.

The mentoring of troubled pupils in secondary schools is widely seen as an important and effective activity that can help support pupils during troubled circumstances (Colley, 2003; Kolar and McBride, 2011). As such, in national policy level discussion concerning raising educational attainment standards, enhancing children’s well-being, and combating anti-social behaviour, criminality and youth unemployment, the mentoring of troubled pupils commonly features as part of the policy level solutions being offered (Dolan and Brady, 2012). Nevertheless, mentoring is no panacea. Whilst there are many success stories, and often moving accounts of how a troubled pupil’s life was turned around through the support of a mentor, there are also many cases where efforts to engage and support a pupil through their involvement in a mentoring scheme had little or no effect (Dubois et al, 2002). More research is clearly needed to gain a better understanding of why and how mentoring can work well, and why and when it doesn’t, particularly in dealing with those pupils often described as ‘hard to reach children’

whose lack of trust in adults makes them particularly resistant to engaging with a mentor and sustaining the relationship for an adequate length of time.

Social pedagogy

In recent years there has been much discussion of how all the professionals who work with children facing troubled circumstances could address children's needs more effectively if they worked together across professional boundaries, and considered each child's set of diverse needs in a holistic manner. Such discussion has included a consideration of the professional practice of 'social pedagogy' which occurs in many countries in mainland Europe (Cameron and Moss, 2011; Paget et al, 2007).

Social pedagogy as practice can be found in a range of settings: residential care, nurseries, schools, youth clubs, hospitals and young offender units. At the heart of the work of those trained in social pedagogy (social pedagogues) is the formation of a trusting relationship with the child. Social pedagogy is characterised by:

- Addressing the needs of the whole child – personal, social, educational and emotional;
- The development of a positive relationship between the child and the social pedagogue;
- Enhancing the child's self-esteem and sense of empowerment;
- Fostering the child's sense of social inclusion;
- Working with the child's parents/carers and other professionals to meet the child's needs.

A number of writers have argued that the incorporation of the principles of social pedagogy in the work of mentors would enhance the quality and effectiveness of the support which mentors provide for troubled pupils (Cruddas, 2005). Social pedagogy seeks to empower pupils, to promote their social inclusion, to promote their personal and social development and to help them to remain engaged in schooling. However, because social pedagogy is driven by concerns with social justice, social values and combating social marginalisation, social pedagogic mentoring also involves taking account of the 'big picture'. From its earliest philosophical foundations, social pedagogy has been governed by a moral purpose to improve the well being of the community (Eriksson, 2011; Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2011). As such, the social pedagogic mentoring of troubled pupils is framed by a concern to promote the pupil's sense of citizenship, to enhance their personal, social and civic identity, and to improve community cohesion.

Promoting citizenship, identity and community cohesion

The interface between the pupil's needs which arise from their troubled circumstances on the one hand and what social pedagogic mentoring offers on the other hand is a complex one. Whilst the needs of the pupil are paramount, social pedagogy also involves considering how meeting the pupil's needs plays a part in contributing to the health of

the community within which the pupil lives. As such, helping the pupil also has benefits for the health of the community.

Notions of citizenship, identity and community cohesion all involve how people see themselves and relate with others. Troubled pupils often have a poor self-image, feel socially marginalised, and view themselves as lacking the ability to change their situation for the better. Civic engagement is viewed here as community-based action aimed to improve society and the well-being of others which shapes and informs one's political beliefs, values and behaviour. Much has been written about how the involvement of troubled pupils in civic engagement activities can be beneficial for the pupils concerned (Barber, 2009; Cremin et al, 2011; Morimoto, 2010; Spring et al, 2007). Civic engagement activities offer the following four key benefits for troubled pupils:

- The opportunity to contribute to society by helping others.
- Positive social interaction with others leading to a sense of community inclusion.
- Developing new understandings and skills.
- Improves self-esteem, psycho-social identity and empowerment.

Civic engagement activities on the one hand can promote pupils' notions of citizenship, identity and community cohesion, and on the other hand can promote their self-image, sense of social inclusion and their sense of empowerment. These two complimentary strands of outcomes fit well with the framework of social pedagogic mentoring. As such, mentors of troubled pupils who adopt a social pedagogic approach are well placed to consider how involving their mentees in civic engagement activities will benefit both the pupil and the community.

There are a huge variety of civic engagement activities that are available for secondary school pupils, and many mentors are active participants in civic engagement activities themselves. Many common civic engagement activities involve volunteer work that have socially worthwhile outcomes for the local community. This can involve tackling environmental problems, contributing to community activities, or helping address the needs of disadvantaged and disabled individuals across a wide spectrum of ages. What makes an activity an example of civic engagement lies in the pupil's awareness of its moral and civic purpose, and it is this that has a major benefit in enhancing the pupil's self-esteem, their view of how they relate to others, their sense of social inclusion, and their sense of empowerment. An important feature of mentoring which makes use of civic engagement activities, is that the troubled pupil works as part of a social group which is working collectively, in effect as good citizens, to bring about worthy ends.

Conclusion

Drawing together the benefits for troubled pupils of being mentored on the one hand and participating in civic engagement activities on the other hand highlights a number of common features that can well serve their needs. Mentoring and civic engagement both offer troubled pupils opportunities to feel socially included, to feel empowered, and to feel better about themselves. Moreover, the principles and practice of social pedagogy

are particularly well placed through its twin concern for the welfare of the child and of the local community to underpin this approach to the mentoring of troubled pupils.

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