

Peer Mentoring Literacy Project 2008

Abstract:

In 2008, a pilot Peer Mentoring Literacy Project funded by the Northern Tasmanian Youth Transitions Taskforce, was implemented at Prospect High School (PHS). The model was developed from community need, research, best practice models and a review of PHS student leadership programs. The project combined mentoring, teaching, and behaviour management skills with existing Peer Support structures. Students in Year 7 lacking access to school literacy support but clearly struggling with literacy were matched with a Year 10 Peer Mentor who had undergone training in theory and practical work. Each week they met their student and completed activities that were developed by the English Teacher, Project Consultant and classroom teachers. The project outcomes were to improve the literacy skills of both the student and Peer Mentor, to develop confidence in approaching literacy tasks, to develop strategies that assist with literacy, to increase confidence with IT tasks, and to be recognised for their participation.

Empowerment and belief are the cornerstones of mentoring and were embedded in the training. They enable the development of trust required for students to allow the Peer Mentors to teach them through scaffolding their own knowledge and that gained through teaching sessions throughout the year. Additional benefits observed included improved school cultural changes and enhanced leadership opportunities. Other potential implications include the ability to develop positive relationships at home, work and socially and for parenting in the future.

The University of Tasmania completed an independent evaluation and concluded that the project had identifiable benefits for all stakeholders.

Introduction

The Peer Mentoring Literacy Project was funded by the Northern Tasmanian Youth Transitions Taskforce from December 2007 (previously known as the Northern Tasmanian Area Taskforce). The taskforce was an initiative of Guaranteeing Futures which aims to provide a framework for a diverse range of stakeholders to collaborate at a regional level, in support of post-Year 10 education, training and employment pathways for young people (Northern Tasmania Development Website, 2006).

The role of the taskforce was to identify barriers to young people aged 15-24 entering the workforce or further education and training and to develop strategies to assist participation through coordinated service delivery. A planning day for the Northern Tasmanian Area Taskforce was held on July 3 2006 from which a Regional Strategic plan was developed in consultation with stakeholders. It was from this planning day that mentoring was identified as a preferred strategy to address some of these barriers (Northern Tasmania Development, 2006).

There has been a resurgent interest in mentoring programs both nationally and internationally over the last ten years due to the belief that mentoring offers a promising form of intervention for children and youth (Karcher et al, 2006). This growth in structured mentoring programs has occurred with the recognition of the significance of mentoring relationships across a variety of organisations (Zeldin, Larson & Camino, 2005 in Dubois & Rhodes, 2006) and research that identifies the positive contributions a mentor can make in a young person's life (Baker & McGuire, 2005 in Dubois...2006).

Two potential programs were identified that would suit the dislocated nature of Tasmania's population. Tasmania has the smallest and most decentralised population of Australian states and although there are some rural educational facilities they tend to be limited in size and scope (Environmental Scan...2005). One program had a significant IT component and the other a phone student to student literacy program, both excellent programs developed by The Smith Family (The Smith Family, 2007a, 2007b). However, they were both deemed unsuitable for this project. The phone student to student program lacked the structure to enable diverse teaching strategies and the IT program made it difficult for those students who struggled with IT and literacy to participate as they were unable to express themselves and became frustrated with their poor IT skills (Taskforce Mentoring Case Study Report, 2007). Training And Further Education (TAFE) colleges are also facing the same issues (pers. Comm. Sue Paine, 30 Nov 2007). However, the IT project may be suitable in the future once the fundamentals of literacy have been addressed.

Articles in Tasmania's local newspaper, The Examiner, (Thurs Dec 6 2007, p3) reported that *"Australia's reading literacy performance declined significantly between 2000 and 2006 and (Fri Dec 21, 2007) 'Tasmanian students suffering poor literacy skills are not meeting the needs of the State's employers'.* The Tasmanian Literacy Summit Report (2007) states that *'In 2005, reading, writing and numeracy benchmarks in grades 3 and 5 . . . demonstrated that Tasmanian students performed above the national average on just two of nine indicators but that by grade 7 students were below the national average on all benchmarks'.* The benefits of high literacy levels can be demonstrated by national and international research and include higher employment rates, lower unemployment rates and higher average earnings. High literacy levels also contribute to personal fulfilment by allowing full participation in society and the capacity to actively engage in learning throughout life (Department of Education, 2007).

Therefore, a mentoring program that addressed literacy levels and reflected best practice mentoring became the priority for the taskforce and a model for a Peer Mentoring Literacy Project was developed. A meeting was organised with the Tasmanian Department of Education to determine if there was any potential duplication. It was found that a local high school, Prospect High, was to offer literacy support as part of their Peer Support Program (called Peer Support Leaders within the school but will be known as Peer Mentors for consistency) with Year 10 students mentoring Year 7 students as an elective subject. At that time the high school had the timetabling structure in place but they did not yet have content or a delivery plan developed. It was proposed that the Taskforce provide expertise and

financial assistance for training and development and assistance with the implementation of the program with the intention of sharing and establishing the Peer Mentoring Literacy Project model to other schools in the northern region. This proposal was accepted by the School Principal, Stephen Walley. A literacy consultant, Scott Johnson, was employed to assist in the accessing of tools and resources. An English teacher at Prospect High, Jeanette Dalton, was assigned to work with the project consultant, assist with resource development and implementation of the project. Professor Robert Bland at the School of Social work at The University of Tasmania was engaged to oversee an independent evaluation.

This project potentially addressed not only the needs of those young people requiring additional support in literacy but those in need of leadership opportunities and skill development that are traditionally limited to the few in the high school environment.

Project Outcomes

- To increase the overall literacy skills of both Peer Mentors and their students
- To develop strategies that assist in developing literacy skills
- To develop confidence in approaching literacy tasks
- To increase confidence and skills in IT
- To recognise Peer Mentors for their roles through their assessment and a celebration occasion.

Program Structure

Recruitment/Selection

Peer Mentors were selected by a process of application that was developed through Prospect High school and their school review of leadership positions within the school. Potential Peer Mentors were then assessed by a panel of teachers and selected based upon their applications and all were trained regardless of the subject they were to specialise in. They were given the opportunity to elect to participate in the Literacy project during training. Eighteen elected to participate.

Training

A training program was developed based on the experience and resources of the consultant through the National Youth Mentoring Networks NRGize workshops, the Comment Training Package, The Literacy Tutor Program, Jeanette Dalton, and the feedback from Peer Mentors and other teachers. Training was delivered by the project consultant over six weeks. There were two groups of Peer Mentors. One had timetabled one double period (80 mins) Peer Support on Wednesday afternoons and the other had two double periods per week on a Tuesday and Thursday.

Outline of Training Modules:

- Peer Mentoring – Roles, rights and responsibilities and confidentiality
- Communication Skills – listening, I statements, building relationships, empathy
- Teaching Skills – checking for understanding, setting the atmosphere, explaining tasks and breaking down tasks
- Behaviour Management – strategies for keeping on task, using communication strategies- conflict management, compromise and negotiation
- Literacy – What is literacy? How we read, choosing books, reading aloud strategies, and literacy activities
- Planning and Reflection – planning sessions, reflection and reassessment

Peer Mentors completed a written test at the end of training which was ranked and provided to the school for assessment.

Practicals

Peer Mentors who had only one timetabled session per week had to wait until near the end of Term 1 to put their skills into practise. Those with two sessions per week were able to intersperse training with practical sessions in the classroom each week. Reflection on the experience was conducted after

sessions so that Peer Mentors had an opportunity to discuss any arising issues and get feedback from the teacher.

Matching

In the early stages of the practicals the Peer Mentors were introduced into classrooms and worked with those who seemed to need help in the classroom and were guided by the teachers. The teachers observed the natural matchings and with other information such as benchmarking and primary school assessments of literacy, suggested pairings were made.

Monitoring and support

Each week the Literacy Peer Mentors met twice (for those with two sessions each week) with the English teacher and once with both the English teacher and the Project Consultant to extend their skills and to plan sessions and reflect upon their practise and the project generally. The Peer Mentors and their students worked on a variety of tasks guided by the English Teacher and/or the class teacher when possible.

Celebration and Closure

At the end of term three all Peer Mentors and their students went on an excursion to Kids Paradise, a local indoor entertainment centre. Lunch and afternoon tea and cake were supplied. Peer Mentors and students had been instructed about the relationship ending. The Peer Mentors were asked to write a letter to their students stating what they had enjoyed together, some words of encouragement or praise, and if they were going to keep in contact, some contact details. They gave their letters to their students on the day of the excursion.

Peer Mentors were presented with certificates at the Grade 10 Leavers Assembly.

Students received certificates of participation at their final grade assembly.

Evaluation and Assessment

The University of Tasmania completed an independent assessment using focus groups of students, teachers, parents and peer mentors held in April and November.

A staff, parent, peer mentor and student survey was completed by Mrs Jeanette Dalton midway through the project (Prospect High School Peer Support Review, 2008).

A survey addressing the project outcomes was compiled and given to all students and peer mentors at the conclusion of the project, the results were included in the final project report by the consultant.

Peer Mentors were required to complete a portfolio of their work with their student that was used to determine a grade for participation in Peer Support as an elective in conjunction with other criteria.

Recommendations for best practice

- Whole school support is essential to ensure consistent communication and staff support.
- Peer Mentoring programs should be timetabled or have dedicated time so that time commitments are not conflicting.
- The selection of Peer Mentors needs be quite rigorous to ensure student outcomes are the priority.
- Training is essential and provides vital screening information. Training prepared Peer Mentors for their role by providing the skills required to develop relationships, communicate information and achieve set goals.
- Peer Mentor selection and training sessions should occur at the end of the previous year. This will maximise contact time and allows current Peer Mentors to assist training the new Peer

Mentors thereby consolidating skills, providing additional leadership opportunities, building capacity and sustainability.

- Dedicated training sessions need to continue throughout the year. This ensures that Peer Mentors are kept up to date and as needs arise, they can be supported with the skills required. Reflection time is vital to this process.
- Clear and consistent methods of identifying Grade 7 students need to be established. Diagnostic testing before and after participation would provide valuable quantitative data.
- Monitoring and support needs to be a priority (Peer Support Works, 2005). If students and mentors are to be working one to one outside of the classroom, they need to be regularly visited to ensure that the relationship is working and productive.
- The program needs to be well resourced. Staff need to be given adequate time for preparation, monitoring and reflection.
- The value of the relationship is not to be underestimated. Research supports that the quality of the relationship and the duration of programs are important factors in student outcomes (Rhodes, 2002, 2005).

Expansion

The Project was expanded to four additional schools at end of 2008 and early 2009, the objective being to develop a sustainable model using the resources developed in the pilot program.

Based on the learnings of the pilot project, a training and practical schedule was developed that could be implemented in schools over a couple of weeks interspersing training with practicals sessions.

The critical features of sustainability (in addition to best practice features) included;

- Training the trainer. The allocated teacher was expected to attend all sessions and participate in training so that they were then trained to deliver the training to the next group of Peer Mentors (also very important for building relationship with PM's).
- Capacity building. Trained Peer Mentors assist in training the new Peer Mentors by participation in training and mentoring trainees by allowing them to observe them working with their student.

Schools given the opportunity to participate adopted a model of the project that fitted in with their current curriculum and therefore each school developed a slightly different model.

Discussion

The Peer Mentoring Literacy project has the potential to make a significant difference in schools. Self rated survey results certainly suggest that according to students the project met all of its outcomes and more that were unintended such as improvement in teacher student relations, respect for peers and the usage of the skills learned outside of school. Peer Mentors developed skills such as time management, reflection and planning and utilised strategies such as behaviour management and conflict management.

These assertions are supported by the independent report prepared by the University of Tasmania who state that;

- a. The project aims are broadly stated and this broad focus is appropriate. The project appears to have met these broad goals.
- b. Positive outcomes for the mentors include the development of specific communication and leadership skills, together with a strong sense of satisfaction at contributing positively to the outcomes of the project.
- c. Positive outcomes for students were identified as development of literacy skills, positive learning experiences though engagement with learning opportunities, and greater sense

of agency. This conclusion is based on the reports of year 7 students, their families and the peer mentors.

In this project, the Peer Mentor is primarily doing two things. Firstly, developing a relationship with their student to gain their trust and respect so that they will be able to learn from them and secondly, scaffolding the learning of the student. Bland et al (2009) reported that 'Trust was an integral factor as the mentors recognised that their relationship with younger students became 'easier' after their trust had been gained: *You just have to earn their trust. You get to know them and then they know that you are only there to help. They will come to you when they need it.*

In an educational context, scaffolding is a process by which a teacher can provide a temporary framework for learning. If it is done well, it can assist the student to develop his or her own initiative, motivation and resourcefulness. Over time the student develops the skills and knowledge on their own (Scaffolding as a Teaching Strategy, 2002).

A focus in the training of the Peer Mentors was to emphasise to their students why literacy was important to hopefully improve motivation. Peer Mentors were instructed to specifically talk about what students would be doing in the future and to relate the need for literacy to their future needs and wants. Bland et al (2009) report that "There were significant changes in the student's attitude to reading. For example, one student stated: *I used to like, just like when we went to the library to read I didn't choose any books but now I choose the little novels like when I go to peer support.* Although there was general agreement among the students that they did not like reading, they could now see the relevance of reading in the 'real world'. One student made the following comment: *[You have to learn it]... because if you get a job application you have to read it and sign it.* Another was clear about the change in his attitude to learning: *I don't get the point of reading. I'd rather watch TV or something. Now [I think the point is] to get valuable information and to get a job in case you have to read the contract.* Other students commented that literacy skills were needed for information gathering, obtaining a boat license or passport, filling in forms and getting a better job. As one student said: *And you'll get a better job if you do peer support because if you can't read, then you'll be able to read when you finish because they help.* All the students felt that their literacy skills had improved and were quite specific about the areas that they were now more competent in (Bland et al, 2009).

Damon and Phelps (1989, p197 in Kalkowski 1995) suggest that peer tutoring works because the 'expert' is not too distant in terms of authority and knowledge and these differences affect the discourse between them which results in a more active role of the student. The student feels freer to express opinions, ask questions and risk untested solutions. One student in the project maintained that "*I thought it was scary to work with older people, but now it's not. Learning isn't hard at all.*" This suggests that scaffolding is not only occurring in the subject area but also in other relationships. Young people are often scared to ask questions and the relationship potentially paves the way for a more assertive relationship with the teacher and therefore greater confidence and responsibility for learning. This also has implications for parent and sibling relationships where Peer Mentors can positively role model a big brother or big sister.

One Peer Mentor said that from participating in the program they have learned '*how to teach and learn a lot better than I could before*' and another said that they are now "*more confident with teaching young people*". Bland et al (2009) stated that 'Students appreciated that their individual learning styles were used to plan activities. For example, some students, who were easily distracted, had their activities divided into work time and fun time. Once students had completed a short period of work they were allowed to spend some time doing a computer game or a sport related activity. Students also agreed that 'the opportunity to focus on things that were interesting to them was useful as it kept them motivated and made learning fun. One student spoke enthusiastically about his project on motorbikes, another of his work on a favourite foot ball player. Others described designing magazine covers and creating PowerPoint displays on topics that were relevant to them'.

Rhodes (2002, 2005) proposes that mentoring affects youth in three interrelated ways. Firstly, by enhancing the youth's social relationships and emotional well being, secondly, improving cognitive skills

through conversation and instruction and thirdly, through good role modelling and advocacy which can promote positive identity development. These processes and their efficacy are in turn affected by the quality and longevity of the relationship.

The longevity of the relationship was non-negotiable in the project development and research supports that short term relationships can actually be counterproductive. The development of the relationship and the acceptance of the project in the school take time. A project like this needs to run all year and training at the end of the year prior to commencement allows a whole year for this to develop. In the university evaluation (Bland et al, 2009), it is reported that at the beginning of the program students made comments such as;

*'People have been calling me a retard and I don't know what to do about that'
'I didn't know what it was about at the start but now I do so it's pretty alright'
'And I thought that it would be boring and just doing work and nothing else...'*

Over time as they became more informed and got to know their mentors they talked about seeing the benefits such as getting out of class and learning more. Bland et al (2009) found that students also spoke positively about the things that they did with the mentors including the fun activities, computer work, individual projects, the one-to-one attention and the rewards they received if they worked hard.

By November, their comments reflected their engagement and enjoyment;

The level of enthusiasm for the program was also evident in the way students spoke about encouraging the new year sevens to join the program and how they would like to be mentors when they reached year 10. The students no longer experienced any sense of being stigmatised by the program and most believed that their peers were jealous of them.

One student described the reactions of his class mates saying: *Yeah in class it's like □take me, take me!*

One student commented: *I'm actually hoping like they can do it for year 8s.* (Bland et al, 2009)

The value of this relationship is not to be underestimated. Bland et al (2009) found that "The relationship between the students and their mentors seems to be a significant factor in building this high level of engagement".

Peer mentoring can maximise the existing relationship between older and younger students in a positive way by teaching mentors to use their power wisely. The concept of "personal power" was introduced during mentor training to demonstrate the impact of words and actions when a relationship has a power imbalance. One student reported that they "were no longer scared of the Year 10's" Demonstrating empathy and trying to understand students' thoughts, feelings and approach to learning was also fundamental to this relationship. When encountering difficult behaviours from their student, one mentor reflected on the importance of putting their actions into a wider context: *You kind of work around different things that you know you might think that they're struggling on because it might not be just you, it could be something that happened through the day and makes them into that kind of attitude ...* (Bland et al, 2009).

Research suggests that new friendships are developed, empathy for others' feelings, acceptance of others and a safe place for students to explore concerns or difficult issues such as bullying can be created (Peer Support Works, 2005). This has many implications potentially for retention of those who may traditionally disconnect from not only learning but social connection and belonging in the school environment. Ruby Paynes (1995) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, highlights the different languages used in different social groups which creates a barrier to communication and understanding. In schools, most teachers are middle class and have different values to many of the students who are struggling. Having a diversity of mentors can help to address this issue. Mentors offered social support

at school and also outside of school if they lived close by. Peer Mentors felt that the students felt more comfortable approaching them and talking about things than they did with the teachers. Teachers also called on the mentors at times for support inside and outside the classroom (Bland et al, 2009).

These skills will be invaluable in the transition to further education and/or work and potentially parenting in the future. The model addresses difficulties experienced by mentoring programs nationally and internationally, such as, the availability of mentors (Dubois & Rhodes, 2006), the retention of mentors, and, the complex process of recruiting, training and supervising. The benefits of a school – based program are many, and, with low cost implementation, has been the reason for resurgence in these models (Karcher and Lindwall, 2003 in Karcher et al, 2006). The addition of literacy as a subject of focus was a response to local conditions, but has been researched with significant beneficial results reported (Rekrut, 1992 in Kalkowski, 1995).

Students were very clear in how they thought the program could be improved. The main issues were when mentors didn't turn up, when they didn't have enough time and that they wanted it to continue into Year 8. They thought that timetabling peer mentoring during literacy classes for in class and one to one sessions, and having back up mentors would be good adjustments (Bland et al 2009).

Many of the difficulties associated with implementing this program are typical of the school environment. A crowded curriculum, dissemination of information from school to home and communication between staff. To develop a best practice model in the school environment is possible but it requires the whole school commitment and adequate resources. The expansion of the model demonstrates that schools can adopt the project with minimal initial cost set up to develop a sustainable program which has enormous potential benefits.

Potentially expanding Peer Mentoring to other subject areas and building mentoring skills in all students requires further commitment, but offers a long term capacity building approach that outweighs the initial cost and time outlay.

This project was the culmination of the hard work and effort of a dedicated and committed team of people who have had the belief and the foresight to initiate the project and follow it through. From the initial identification of mentoring as a strategy to address barriers in transition for young people, to the development of a best practice model in Peer Mentoring for Literacy that is expanding to other schools, is a great achievement for all.

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