Student perceptions of Aimhigher learning mentors and post-16 pastoral support

Using research into post-16 withdrawal rates amongst Aimhigher students in one county in the South East of England, Ruth Rogers argues that students benefit significantly from the intensive pastoral support provided in Aimhigher target schools, but that this is rarely carried over into further education (FE). Highlighting the views of young people, she argues that through establishing effective and cohesive mentoring schemes, schools and FE colleges can have a substantial role to play in reducing student withdrawal.

Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore whether mentoring schemes have a role in reducing student withdrawal. This was investigated through interviews with young people and staff in order to discover the benefits of effective mentoring, especially in Aimhigher schools (see Box 1 for information about Aimhigher).

Research interviews

Twenty interviews were conducted in total (ten young people, nine staff members and one guardian). The interview sample was gained largely through the researcher’s in-depth knowledge of the schools and colleges and through using snowball sampling. Every reasonable effort was made to ensure the sample was balanced and reflected the various teaching institutions. Interviews included four students who had transferred from an Aimhigher target school into a grammar school, four year 11 students in an Aimhigher target school and two students who had transferred from an Aimhigher target school into FE. One had subsequently withdrawn from study but was due to begin again next term, and one was still in college, (the foster parent of this student was also interviewed). Staff interviewed included staff members with significant responsibilities for student transition from two FE colleges and seven staff members with significant sixth-form responsibilities from five schools (two grammar schools and three Aimhigher schools).

Interviews were semi structured, tape recorded and analysed thematically and, being often up to two hours long, they generated extremely rich qualitative data. They focused on:

- the levels of support currently available to students
- forms of support students feel they would benefit from
- limitations institutions faced in providing this support
- level of communication between Aimhigher target schools and receiving institutions
- factors influencing student withdrawal from education.
Research findings

Although FE colleges often provide a wide range of alternative support opportunities for young people (including fortnightly pastoral support sessions and drop-in clinics), they are often underused by young people. Instead, interview data with Aim higher schools, FE colleges and young people in this project suggested that young people frequently choose to return to their previous support networks at their old school and talk to their Aim higher Learning Mentors (AHLMs), rather than taking advantage of the often extensive and expensive support available to them in their new institution. Evidence from interviews with staff and students suggested that AHLMs were central to engendering a sense of mutual self-help in their students. The AHLMs developed effective, strong relationships with young people that often continued after the student completed school. Interview data suggested three specific factors that positively influenced the strength of the relationship between the student and AHLM. These included the importance of psycho-social support, consistency and availability and the belief in the student that their AHLM has a personal investment in them.

Emotional support

The support networks established by the school and AHLM are highly significant in developing self-efficacy in young people. Rutter (1991) argues that effective support networks within schools enable young people to develop ‘protective mechanisms’ (Rutter, 1991). Other research suggests schools can play an important role in developing self-esteem and self-efficacy in young people, which is central to their personal and social development and in ‘fostering resilience’ (McLaughlin and Alexander, 2005, p. 14). Demonstrating the key role played by the AHLM in supporting young people, the following is a quotation from a student who was in care, had transferred from an Aim higher target school into FE and was no longer under the care of her AHLM. When asked if there was anyone at the college she could get support from if she needed it, she said she would always prefer to speak to her ALHM at her previous school.

No. Cos, well, the only thing with him as well is that I’ve like, I’ve built up a relationship with him, I could talk to him about practically anything. If there was someone at college, I wouldn’t really know them. It’s hard to talk to people that you don’t like, know, if you’ve got a problem or that.
The support provided by the AHLM went beyond practical or instrumental support in terms of how to fill out applications, offer advice on study skills, or careers options. The strength of this relationship in terms of not only being able to provide practical support but also emotional support, was raised by all ten students interviewed.

**Consistency and availability**

Students were asked to describe the support they felt would be of most benefit to them and other students in post-16 education. The consensus of opinion was that any support needed to be consistent and readily available: ‘Dunno. People like [my AHLM]. Somebody that’s there all the time. There needs to always be somebody there really, someone you can talk to for support.’

This view was reiterated by a current FE student who described one of the best qualities of their AHLM: ‘He was persistent, that was the best thing about him. He was always there.’ The importance of availability was also expressed throughout staff interviews, with grammar school staff commenting: ‘It’s a hands-on role, I think people who don’t tend to teach is what you need.’ Similarly, during an interview with the carer of one student, the importance in there being consistency in the support offered to young people was repeated: ‘There should be somebody there all the time … It’s no good with an appointment.’

This scepticism was also reiterated by an AHLM. They felt the support students value most highly is when there is ‘a room and person available at all times’. Although it was understood that financial constraints may not make this possible, it was expected that the appropriate person could also have another role, but it was essential that there needs to be ‘a quiet, safe haven for young people on a constant basis’. This AHLM went on to say that ‘making appointments is completely ineffectual. Personality is very important.’

**Personal investment**

Another area mentioned by many students was the sense that their AHLM had made a personal investment in their well-being. The head of sixth form at one Aimhigher school explained how students often return to the school after struggling with what they perceive to be the ‘impersonal’ nature of FE. Indeed, one student who transferred away explained: ‘I’m not happy there. My tutor doesn’t even talk to me’, whilst another student revealed: ‘I don’t think I’ve spoken to my tutor since I’ve been there.’ Conversely, one student who had transferred from an Aimhigher target school into FE spoke in detail of the value he placed in the sense of personal investment his AHLM had made in positively shaping his future and development. This particular student felt he and his
AHLM had created a strong sense of mutual responsibility, and his AHLM had helped him onto a second FE course.

You need someone who puts the effort into helping you out, and not because they get paid for it. You need someone who you feel actually really invests in you. Then you feel like you have to do it and work hard for them too, you owe it to them to try your best and not drop out. …I owe her everything, basically. At school, she used to pull me out of lessons that weren’t that important, normally PE, and help me with my coursework. She really bumped my grades up and if it wasn’t for her, I never would have got into college. I’d probably just be a crackhead.

Research into the relationship between mentoring and counselling has found evidence that counselling skills and behaviours are a key part of the mentoring (Stokes, 2003). Evidence from this research suggested the mentoring provided by AHLMs involved a positive emotional alignment and operated very much from within this counselling environment.

Benefits of a collaborative, cohesive mentoring scheme

Evidence from interviews with FE and school staff suggested there was all too often insufficient information sharing between institutions regarding personalised student needs. Comments offered by Aimhigher school staff included: ‘This information sharing is invaluable, but happens far too infrequently’ and ‘I think links would be good. It would only be a positive thing.’ Receiving institutions generally knew very little of the background or individual needs of their newly-enrolled students. One FE staff member with responsibility for transition and induction commented: ‘As it stands at the moment there is no communication between Aimhigher target schools and FE colleges and that’s one of the biggest problems that have arisen.’

Interviews with AHLMs and FE college staff demonstrated the value in having more established relationships and links between Aimhigher schools and receiving institutions. They felt this could be as simple as having an FE project officer visiting Aimhigher schools and being introduced to students by their AHLM. They felt that there is currently no visible connection between AHLMs and pastoral tutors in FE, but that students would be more willing to discuss problems with FE mentors or pastoral support if they felt they were to some extent ‘working together’. One AHLM believed ‘…they should work together as a team, but always work for the students. They need someone they can go to. A lot of kids nowadays can’t go home and talk to their parents.’ Another AHLM explained:

There needs to be something that enables the student to see the AHLM and the Pastoral Tutor as a ‘unit’. If the student could see that the school and college are working together… Mrs such and such is working at the college, they’re a unit. They work together.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the benefits of effective mentoring. It has argued that the pastoral support provided to students in both compulsory education and post-16 education could be more effective if AHLMs and FE college staff worked more collaboratively to provide a more cohesive mentoring system and facilitate a more seamless transition into post-16 education. Whilst it is acknowledged that some FE colleges currently provide high levels of pastoral support to students, evidence emerging from this research suggested that the support is not clearly linked to that provided in Aimhigher.
Aimhigher target schools and FE colleges need to collaborate more effectively to maximise the potential from existing relationships

It is clear that AHLMs can provide excellent levels of support and mentoring to vulnerable young people. Given this, Aimhigher target schools and FE colleges need to collaborate more effectively to maximise the potential from existing relationships and develop a more coherent transitional support schedule that is in the best interests of both the institution and the student.

References


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