



Raising Aspirations Programme Interim Report, February 2013

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Introduction

The Raising Aspirations programme was established by Somerset Community Foundation in 2011 with support from Ninesquare Trust and a private donor to develop a programme of support to raise the aspirations and attainment of young people, particularly those from low-income households.

In its first year 40 pupils at Crispin School aged between 12 and 14 commenced one to one mentoring relationships with trained volunteers from the local community¹.

Research

Recent research has shown that coaching and mentoring can have a beneficial impact on learners and their educational performance. Specifically, coaching relationships with students have been shown to have a positive effect on educational performance, well-being, hopefulness and attitude to learning².

As the programme moves in to its second year Somerset Community Foundation is working with researchers from the University of East London to evaluate the impact of the programme. Over the course of a three year evaluation Drs Chris Pawson and Christian van Nieuwerburgh will be evaluating the impact of the programme on the participants. Specifically, the researchers will be tracking their aspirations and achievements over the years approaching their GCSEs. In order to ascertain the potential added value provided by the programme, any changes observed amongst the participants will then be compared with those occurring amongst a control group of non-participants over the same time period. The results of this evaluation will be crucial for achieving our goal to promote the model more widely across the county.

An ethically approved protocol for all research has been agreed by all parties and baseline data from Year 7 and Year 8 pupils has been collected.

Early Indicators of Impact on Pupils

Semi structured interviews took place with both child and adult participants in the programme when they met at a social gathering in July 2012. Although it is too early to comment on any quantitative changes in aspirations and attainment, when we look at the data together with feedback gathered since the start of the programme, themes that have emerged look very promising in terms of programme impact.

¹ 34 of the 40 have continued on the programme into the second year.

² Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Shidler, 2009; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2012

Young people have reported that their participation is equipping them to engage more successfully with the educational challenges that they are confronted by, and that they feel that achieving their goals is now more realistic than it was prior to the programme beginning.

Quotes from current participants include:

Resilience

“Sometimes I want to give up on something and [my mentor] says don’t give up, try your hardest, because whatever you want to be in life you can be if you try the hardest.”

“We talk about stuff like what subject in school I like or dislike. How I can improve my work on something I’m not enjoying.”

“[My mentor] helps with my anger at the moment.”

Opportunities/Awareness

“It is very handy. If you don’t have a clue on what to do in the future, the mentor could give you advice on what to do in the future and how to prepare as well and also how to do the things within school as well.”

“They [the mentors] give you ideas and ways to achieve your aspirations in life.”

[My mentor] has encouraged me, but not in a forcing way. So I can choose if I want to and I do want to.”

Trust and Relationships

“I would say it is good. Because if you say something that you don’t want anyone else [to know] say for example your best classmate, if you say it to your mentor, it doesn’t leave that room.”

“It’s sort of easier to talk to [my mentor] about school rather than a teacher, because you are not allowed to talk to one teacher about another teacher, so it’s easier to talk about another teacher that you don’t really like or doesn’t really like you.”

“Yes, since we started talking I come out with ideas on getting on the teachers good side, so that teachers may like me as well and the lesson has improved with that teacher.”

Impact on Mentors

Although our focus is on raising the aspirations and achievements of young people, adult participants are also reporting a positive experience – a further indicator of beneficial impact and, most importantly, an indicator of the project’s future sustainability. Although three mentors from the first year have left the programme, this has not been as a result of a negative

experience but because of external factors which have impacted on their ability to continue to devote sufficient time and energy to the project.

Mentors are building new skills through the training, adding variety to their work and life experiences, meeting new people and developing stronger networks. Many of our mentors say that they also learn and benefit from their relationships with their mentees.

"I think as a whole process, as a whole idea. I would obviously say that every school should have one [a mentoring scheme] really."

"It makes you feel good without the selfish thing!"

"[My mentee] has been able to improve some aspects of his life. And hopefully I have played a small part in allowing him to do that."

"I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of the programme and I am looking forward to resuming the sessions in September. It has provided me with a great deal of learning as a parent."

"To be a mentor you have to be very good at listening, be mindful, observant and calm. All these are key attributes which tie in nicely with my job. The training was very useful and I have learned the importance of giving back by sharing my career path experiences with my mentee. Whatever he aspires to be in the future, I would like to help guide him there."

Added Value

The involvement of volunteers from the business community has had some unexpected benefits for the whole school community. Staff at the school are making use of the volunteers to help with careers advice and work experience links. One volunteer has been approached to run a training session for staff on the GROW model to improve mentoring skills in house.

Next Steps

The Raising Aspirations programme is now in its second year and has increased to 80 the number of adult volunteers wishing to embark on coaching and mentoring partnerships with young people. In the next six months the evaluation team will be conducting semi structured interviews with the first cohort of mentees (now Year 8 pupils) and in August 2013 will produce a journal-ready paper on the qualitative data collected.