Mentoring….building quality relationships with young people to improve learning outcomes
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Mentoring has grown in popularity over the past decade, with many organisations and businesses offering mentoring as a support strategy for new staff and emerging leaders. However, mentoring is not exclusive to the corporate world and the underlying principles and ideas of mentoring are also relevant to the schooling sector and in particular working with disadvantaged young people.

Although the definition of mentoring may be different depending on the context in which it is used e.g. the schooling sector, transport industry sector or heath sector, the underlying focus that emerges is one of developing a mutual relationship between two people. For example:

“Mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship between a more experienced person and a learner, developed within an agreed time frame, to improve learner well being, pathways planning and/or learner achievement”. DECS 2008

“Mentoring aims to provide a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement”.1 Youth Mentoring Network

The rationale for introducing mentoring as a retention strategy into the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) is based on the current economic climate in Australia. In a recent report to COAG, MCEETYA2 commented that:

“Australia’s living standards and continuing prosperity relies on young people participating in the labour force and being productive contributors. Arguably, this has never been more important than now, as we face the demographic challenges brought on as the ‘boomers’ leave the labour force. We currently face skills needs in a number of industry and occupation areas and this is predicted to become even sharper in some sectors. We simply cannot afford to have even a small proportion of young people being left out of the opportunity to work, study, continually re-skill and contribute to our economy.”

What is significant for school leaders is recognising how crucial it is for young people to successfully complete school so that they may transition to further education, training or work.

From around the world there is strong evidence that raising the level of quality teaching and learning can make a 20% difference, at best, in student attainment outcomes with the remaining 80% influenced by the student’s background and context3.

The majority of young people do finish school and transition to further education, training and employment, and have excellent prospects for the future. However, there remains a significant number who struggle to remain connected to school.

For economically disadvantaged students these contexts are significant and have profound consequences on their education. Factors such as a lack of a positive role model from a significant adult, frequent transition and disruption in schooling, drug and alcohol issues at home and low levels of participation in quality early years care and education impact on a young person’s capacity to engage successfully with schooling.

1 Youth Mentoring Network http://www.youthmentoring.org.au
2 MCEETYA, 2006, Transition pathways from school to work or further study, unpublished report prepared for COAG, pg 7.
3 Variance in performance between students with schools and between schools, Petra Lietz ACER 2009
“The more negative life events a young person has, the more likely they are to engage in problem behaviours and the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of positive activities”.

These problem behaviours impact not only on families, but schools and their communities as well as broader society. Schools are impacted through increased costs for special and remedial education, diagnosis and treatment of learning difficulties, and managing behavioural problems including suspension and exclusion. Society in general is impacted through increased costs associated with unemployment, crime prevention, and increased health costs and economically through lack of productivity.

A recent discussion paper released by the Australian Youth Mentoring Network in 2009 stated:

“Mentoring responds to a number of significant social trends that have diminished the presence of responsive adults in the lives of young people:

- families often have both parents working, and many are working long and ‘unsociable’ hours to the detriment of the child’s wellbeing,
- youth cultures are increasingly disconnected from older age cultures and many young people don’t know how to communicate and behave with adults,
- more children are being raised in single parent households,
- a significant number of young people live in households with no employed parent,
- only half of students aged 15 years reported that parents spent time ‘just talking’ to them more than once a week.”

There is overwhelming evidence, both nationally and internationally, that consistently highlights the benefits of mentoring. These benefits extend not only to students, but also to mentors, educators, parents and the whole school community. A review carried out on 10 mentoring programs by Jekeilek, Moore, Hair and Scarupa (2002) concluded that:

Mentoring programs can be effective tools for enhancing the positive development of youth. Mentored youth are likely to have fewer absences from school, better attitudes towards school, fewer incidents of hitting others, less drug and alcohol use, more positive attitudes toward their elders and toward helping in general, and improved relationships with their parents.

McDonald’s (2002) research on youth development points to the benefits of providing youth with caring adults to help them navigate the challenges of growing up, stating:

The approach of youth development is to help youth become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. It concentrates on building strengths rather than working to diminish youth’s deficits or risks.

Mentors (teachers, school staff and community volunteers) can mutually benefit from the mentoring relationship through increased skills, self esteem, improved networks and even improved job prospects. Schools and their communities can also benefit from a whole school approach to mentoring.

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4 Don’t waste your breath, Andrew Fuller, 2005
5 Building critical social infrastructure: the business case for expanding support for school based mentoring in Australia. Youth Mentoring Network, February 2009
6 Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development. Susan M. Jekeilek, M.A., Kristin A. Moore, PhD, Elizabeth C. Hair, PhD, and Harriet J. Scarupa, M.S. Child Trends February 2002
through a reduction in behaviour management issues and anti-social behaviour at schools, improved staff morale, improved school image and stronger community partnerships.

It is for these reasons that DECS introduced mentoring in 2003, as a retention strategy in schools with secondary enrolments to support those students affected by the raising of the school leaving age to 16.

In 2004-07, mentoring was extended to selected primary schools through the School Retention Action Plan (SRAP), to support primary students in year 6 and 7 transition to high school. From 2010-13, mentoring has been further expanded under the Commonwealth’s Smarter Schools Communities Making a Difference National Partnership (NP) to support identified students in years 5-9.

DECS is continuing to promote mentoring as one of three main strategies under the Smarter Schools Communities Making a Difference NP, as it provides a flexible, student centred and strengths based approach to supporting the learning needs of young people from low Socio Economic Status (SES) backgrounds.

Results of mentoring support over the past six years have been profound. Quantitative and qualitative data collected from participating schools have consistently shown improved retention rates of students involved in mentoring, improved learning and achievement, improved wellbeing and resilience, and students articulating positive perceptions of their futures.

There have however, been some failures along the way, and some of these can be explained through poor matching of students with mentors or because some students do not respond to this type of intervention.

**What students tell us about mentoring:**

- “It’s really good. You get to talk to someone. She’s like a friend.”
- “He inspires me to do what I want and to do my best.”
- “I felt like I couldn’t do anything. Since being with ….. I feel confident. I am getting As and Bs.”
- “She’s opened my eyes to what opportunities are available.”
- “Now we just sit down and talk about what is happening in our life.”
If I have a problem at school I talk it through with her.”

“He’s great. I’ve never had anyone to talk to about school work and anything in general. We get along really well because he is such a happy person and easy to discuss issues with.”

“He understands my feelings and thoughts and is great to get along with. I really look forward to Tuesdays now.”

What schools are telling us about mentoring:

Feedback from four schools in 2007: Campbelltown Primary School, Forbes Primary School, Port Lincoln Primary School, and Windsor Gardens Vocational College.

- One student comes on the mentoring day just to see his mentor.
- Students are quite open to their peers that they see a mentor.
- Many of our mentored students have built up their self esteem and are open to constructive discussion about setting personal goals and discussing things generally.
- All the students that have had mentoring have improved their communication skills and social ability to mix with their peers
- The mentoring program has acted to strengthen links between the school and wider community, as relationships with mentors has flourished.
- Parents of students involved in mentoring report significant improvement in the self-esteem and positive attitude of their children. One parent travels from Gawler to Campbelltown each day because she does not want the improvements made by her daughter, to cease. This mother will also be travelling to the local high school from Gawler next year, and has requested the mentoring continue.
- The mentoring program is a silent achiever, with significant gains and benefits for students involved; support for the role of teachers; promotes a sense of care and well-being with the local community; and improves self-esteem in the eyes of parents.
- Relationships are the building blocks for community and the essence of leading a purposeful and happy life. This spills over into the students learning and social life. This value adding benefits the school community: happy kids = happy schools.
- Attendance and inclusion rates for participating students have risen. This builds the success and social capital for our community.
- Children’s own sense of success/being noticed for the right reasons/being heard and treated just a little bit special has helped them connect and belong with their community.
- Re-focussing - has helped enormously in getting 'at risk' students back on track.
- Making students feel special - especially students without positive / supportive adult role models at home.
- Improved home / school relationships - lots of positive feedback (e.g. one of our dads broke down and hugged the coordinator for facilitating this program!)
- Aided Year 7 / 8 transition due to students now being far more accepting of, and positive towards, change.

How can schools make a difference?

It is important for all educators to gain a greater understanding of what it is that drives young people to walk out, for disengagement is a gradual process. As school leaders, it is up to us to play our part in turning this trend around.

When we actively listen to the voices of disengaging young people, they often tell us that there is a mismatch in their lives at school and their lives beyond school. They tell us that they disengage because nothing in the curriculum seems to have relevance or connects with their wider lives. They tell us they’re not smart enough to do the work or they are having this perception reinforced by adults around them e.g. ‘you’re stupid’. And they also tell us that poor student-teacher relationships play a major factor in their leaving. All of these factors contribute to disengagement.
Mentoring takes a holistic view of the young person. The key skills in a mentoring role are, to actively listen to the young person, to focus on their strengths rather than their deficits and provide positive support and feedback to support their wellbeing, learning and achievement and pathways planning.

Providing disengaging students with a mentor, (either a staff member or community volunteer) or adopting a whole of school mentoring pedagogical approach, can assist students to take control of their circumstances and change their direction to re-engage with learning and more positive futures. It is the underlying principle of developing a quality relationship between a student and a significant adult (mentor), which is central to mentoring support.

*It is the strength and quality of the relationship between 2 people that is the single most decisive factor in bringing about growth ....change*. Peter Slattery

A report produced by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in Feb 2001 entitled ‘Building relationships – making education work’ stated that:

*... the most important factor to connect young people to school that was discussed by students was that of relationships: with teachers and with other students - the social environment and their friendships. A large part of this importance is related to the level of responsibility and mutual respect generated by these relationships.*

The strategies used in a mentoring relationship are very similar to the constructivist teaching and learning principles described in the SACSA Framework.

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Learning is the process of constructing knowledge. Learning is not linear; it involves learners extending, elaborating, reorganising, reformulating and reflecting upon their own frameworks of knowledge.¹⁰

Students are supported in the mentoring relationship to build on prior knowledge, by developing skills and dispositions, setting personal goals and making decisions about their learning, wellbeing and career pathways.

Mentors support students by:

- managing individualised programs, goals and targets
- negotiating teaching and learning activities, issues and contexts
- guiding and facilitating learning processes
- using and building concepts to assist mentees to form the big picture of learning
- having high expectations with enabling support
- networking community learning partnerships
- teaching for and supporting respectful interactions
- providing for intervention and extension
- interrelating and integrating learning across Learning Areas
- expecting different ways of knowing and showing learning
- fostering critical and respectful listening
- facilitating and extending learners’ capacities to judge their own progress and growth.

Since the introduction of mentoring in SA schools, over 9000 students have received mentoring support with positive outcomes.

**Additional research**


Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People, If they don’t give up on you – you don’t give up on you, Government of South Australia, January 2008

Mentoring Benchmarks, Australian Youth Mentoring Network, [www.youthmentoringnetwork.org](http://www.youthmentoringnetwork.org)

¹⁰ SACSA Frameworks - Department of Education and Training. DETE Publishing 2001