

## Report on the Ethos of Empowerment programme

I am Deputy Headteacher at an independent special school for children with mild disabilities and SEN. We ran the Ethos of Empowerment Pilot, a personal development programme working with pupils, parents and teachers together, in partnership with Every Family Matters.

### **Engagement levels: school**

Running the Parent Champion (PC) courses has been a big commitment for the school as they were held during the school day and comprised of two groups of 8 x 2 hour weekly sessions, each attended by 2 staff.

The school had recently set up a Parent Teachers Forum with the aim of improving both communication and engagement with parents; the parent coaching project was initiated when parents, at the first meeting of the PTF, requested that the school run workshops that would help them support their children's learning and well being. The Parent Champion course has enabled the school to respond to this request highly effectively and there was very positive appreciation by parents throughout its duration.

The PC course has provided the School with a practical and results-orientated strategy to improve parental engagement, strengthened by its thorough evaluative reports of measurable outcomes.

Unfortunately, two members of staff dropped out, both after four sessions and both attributing the pressure of their teaching commitments as their reason. They did remark on the value of teachers and parents being in the sessions together, giving them a better understanding of the particular experiences of the pupils and their parents, appreciating how this had built a closer bond between them. On reflection, it was concluded that their lack of commitment meant that the course was not valued highly enough by these teachers nor by the senior management staff who might have done more to encourage their participation; and the fault probably lies with the way it was introduced to them, highlighting this as an important factor for the success of the next course.

Including teachers in sessions with parents was an entirely new concept. By nature, coaching involves intimate revelations and honesty is paramount, as is the need to feel comfortable talking. One parent did raise this as an issue during the third session, but the majority of parents agreed its benefits and we continued. The class assistant who completed the course (and is now on a GTP) remarked:

*"The PC course is already seeming to have a positive effect. Parents and teachers are able to communicate more effectively now that trusting relationships are growing within the groups. A fantastic tool for enabling a more inclusive school environment."*

In a dissertation she produced, as a study of the parent coaching project, she writes:

*'The outcome, of open and trusting relationships between parents and teachers, must be acknowledged as a substantial contribution to breaking down barriers to children's learning. The participants reveal a connection with the other members of the course and by the nature of the revelations during the sessions, have come to a deeper understanding of their students' social and academic learning contexts. Whilst this investigation is not able to produce quantifiable evidence of this, the qualitative references at least suggest the beginnings of a 'genuine partnership'.*

I wrote in a report to our trustees:

*"I have to say that personally I have been overwhelmed by the response to this course and by the achievements of the individuals taking part. Obviously we would not have embarked on this programme unless we were convinced of its value to the school, but it has more than met my expectations. What we are creating here is open and trusting relationships between parents, teachers and pupils and I had not realised the potential of this until now. We are experiencing the benefits of this already and I feel excited about how this will contribute to our mission of unleashing the potential of our pupils still further."*

Comments from parents include:

*"The course has given me time to think and reflect and have more energy to move forward. I feel a stronger bond with other parents and staff."*

*"Good to feel we are striving together for the good of ourselves, our families and especially these students."*

#### **Engagement levels: parents**

We ran two courses at different times, both of which tied in with dropping off and picking up times, to ensure that as many parents as possible could attend: mornings at 9-11am and afternoons 1.30-3.30pm. An evening session was also offered (particularly to enable working fathers to attend) but we only had one person interested so it didn't run.

Out of 22 families, 19 parents participated (18 mums, 1 dad), 12 completed the course and attained a certificate.

*"The course has been extremely helpful to me at a very crucial time for my family."*

*"I was at a very low ebb right at the beginning, wondering how on earth we would manage to help our daughter. The support provided not only by the course guidance, but also by the other parents in our group, were both key to me being able to embark on a new approach. It is still hard work staying on track, and it is all too easy to slip into old habits, but it is possible – and life-changing."*

*"I have found the Parent Champion course very useful and as the weeks have gone on I have felt stronger and more in control of myself and home situations."*

*"This is a great opportunity for all parents to take part."*

*"So far the Parent Coaching course has dramatically enhanced my intuition within our family, and has led to a clarity of thought that, on many practical levels, has profoundly changed the way I have handled difficult and challenging situations."*

*"What worked for me and my family is the recognition that small steps to problem solving work best and that a 'fix-it' approach just places intolerable stress on ones self and others."*

*"I feel more willing to learn from my mistakes and not focus on regret. I think I have been able to pass this philosophy onto my kids."*

### **Engagement levels pupils**

The coaching sessions for the students were delivered as PSHE lessons during the Spring and Summer Term. These were of a more exploratory nature as the materials were being adapted from the PC materials and the actual course is being delivered next term, in full. However, pupils did experience progress in their personal development.

We are currently in the process of developing ways of measuring this progress but the following comments give an idea of what they achieved:

Pupil A stated *"I feel less anxious about things now. I have become a lot more positive about going to school and actually enjoy it rather than dread it everyday. My family have noticed a real difference in my behaviour and are so pleased to see me happy again. I am doing things that I never thought I could."*

Pupil B stated that he felt that his mum had become more understanding since completing the Coaching course. *"Mum used to shout a lot but now she stays much calmer and gives me, and her, time to cool down after a disagreement before we discuss things. I know things are my fault sometimes, and I know, now, that this makes mum upset and frustrated. I guess we have both learned how to deal with each other better, we can sort of put ourselves in each others shoes."*

Pupil C agreed with Pupil B with respect to his mum also seeming to be calmer, with less shouting, since the course. He also stated *"Mum and I are doing more together since she attended the course and I am allowed to do more. I think I've changed a bit because I can now tell when mum is feeling sad or upset."*

Pupil D stated *"I don't think the Coaching has had any particular impact on myself, as I have always been a positive person. I have noticed, though, that since the Coaching course, mum has felt better and is more able to deal with my sister (Pupil D explained that his sister is not very confident and has some friendship issues at the mainstream school that she attends. This impacts on her behaviour at home.) Mum is calmer and*

*my sister's behaviour is now improving because of this, so I think Coaching is a good idea".*

*Pupil E: "I have acknowledged more success than I have usually done. I have learnt that if you are more positive then more positive things happen to you. Other people have noticed my positivity and have an influence."*

*Pupil F said (as far as I can recall): "You know the coaching we are doing in class, like you are doing with the parents, well I think its working because last night I only had to stay in my room for ten minutes, and then I came down and I was alright."*

### **Pupils attendance**

No evaluative evidence was collected. However, in the School's Ofsted Report (May 2012) it noted about the students:

*'They develop into confident and well-rounded young people with real enthusiasm for learning and school life and show exceptionally positive attitudes towards overcoming their disabilities. Consequently, their attendance is above average when medical treatments and illness are not counted.'*

### **Pupils progression**

As explained above, the coaching sessions for the students were delivered as PSHE lessons and in the same Ofsted report, the inspector wrote about how the various aspects of the school's curriculum *"are making significant contributions to students' personal, social and health education (PSHE)"*. Of course, the coaching sessions were a small part of the overall provision, but in a conversation I had with the inspector the content of the sessions were acknowledged as contributing in particular to *"building self-esteem"*.

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