

Action Research Project 2015-16:

Mentoring Scheme

Would a Mentoring Scheme be beneficial for A Level Students?

If so, how would that Mentoring Scheme be structured?

How would it operate; who would use it; when and where would the scheme take place?

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Rationale

With increasing pressure on young people to gain more, high quality qualifications and the view that examinations are becoming more challenging, particularly with the return to terminal assessment A levels, students need support more than ever in combatting the adjustment period between GCSE and A Levels and in meeting the academic demands of post-16 education in order to fulfil their potential success in Sixth Form.

One way in which this could be addressed is through a peer mentoring scheme among Year 12 and 13 students. However, our success with mentoring schemes has been limited and as a research group we were curious to find out why this has been the case. So, we decided to investigate the reasons why, and as part of our research we wanted to discover what students would expect from a mentoring scheme and how they believe it could be implemented successfully in order to improve the experience and grades of Rainham Mark Sixth Form students.

Methodology

As a group, we decided the most appropriate method of data collection would be a questionnaire, which we could distribute to all Year 12 students, giving us the widest sample of those who would be those most likely to access a Mentoring Scheme. Clearly, this would provide us with the most representative sample of data. Interviews, which we would conduct on fewer members of the population, would give us more detailed and open answers, allowing us to gain a more in-depth understanding of people's personal feelings. Interviews will hopefully expand upon the information from the surveys, providing more depth and detail to why people answered the way they did.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire was used as a way of revealing what the majority consensus was to our questions and how they felt about a mentoring scheme. It was designed in a way to ensure that the questions were unambiguous, needed no further explanation and were

clear and concise. For the most part, the questions were closed. We believe this made it easier and quicker for each participant to complete the survey. However, we had to be careful when creating 'option' answers that all possible or likely answers were included, so that no-one was unable to answer the question. The questionnaire gave us general, statistical data.

The sample for the survey was all Year 12 students. They completed the questionnaire using Moodle during morning registration on a rolling form basis. This meant that we had a total of 149 responses. *(See Appendices 1 & 2)*

Interviews

We used a semi-structured interview as it gave us the ability to ask structured questions of the respondent and they could elaborate as much or as little as they wished. This meant that we could obtain many in-depth answers to the same questions, thus enabling us to compare the answers to each individual question. A semi-structured interview also allows both the interviewer and interviewee to feel fully relaxed, encouraging more honest and valid responses.

The sample we used for the interviews was also taken from Year 12. We used equal ratio of male:female students in order to pursue a representative sample. In total, the 5 researchers each interviewed 4 students, providing a total sample of 20 students.

(See Appendix 3)

Data Analysis

Questionnaires

Our initial form of collecting data, the questionnaire that was sent out to the entire year 12 group, provided useful data as well as providing a good structure for our interviews.

The full set of responses is in *Appendix 4*.

The questionnaire showed that the majority of people would prefer a mentoring scheme that helped with **academic work and guidance by subject**, with **37%** selecting this option. However, the option of a careers based mentoring scheme was also popular, being selected by 30% of the year group. The two less popular options were a time management

based scheme that helped with homework or coursework, which was chosen by 23% of people, and a scheme that helped with emotional support, which was selected by 10%.

This is reflected in the results which asked the question, "How would you prefer to be matched to your mentor?". **54%** responded by **single academic subject** and 39 % by career aspirations.

An area of the questionnaire where the results were overwhelmingly one-sided was when it came to whether or not the scheme would be voluntary or mandatory. **83%** decided on **voluntary**, signifying that people would hugely prefer a choice in the matter. Although, one student did comment that a mandatory scheme that could be opted out of would be beneficial as some would not know what the scheme entailed.

Students also said that they would prefer the mentoring to be conducted on a **one-to-one** basis – **46%**. The second most popular option was where one mentor mentored two people (27%). Group mentoring was very clearly the least preferred option. This meant that our next question on preferred group size was rather irrelevant.

41% of students felt that the frequency of contact with their mentor should be **once a week**, but 35% felt that it would be more appropriate whenever necessary. 23% felt that once every two weeks would be the optimum frequency of contact.

One of the questions asked when a suitable time for meeting with the mentor would be. The most popular response was to use an **allocated library period**, which was preferred by **37%** of respondents. 30% felt that morning registration would be the best time.

Whilst the most popular option for contacting their mentor would be **face-to-face** for **42%** of respondents, social media and email were also considered important possibilities for 16% and 25% respectively. On social media, Facebook was the preferred option.

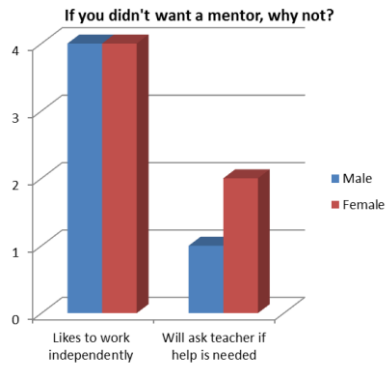
Respondents were given the opportunity to include anything else which may have been useful with regards to a mentoring scheme. Responses were limited, but the most interesting comments suggested a mandatory, opt-out scheme and another respondent commented that mentoring may be more productive with someone you already know. Interestingly, this view wasn't replicated in the interviews.

Interviews:

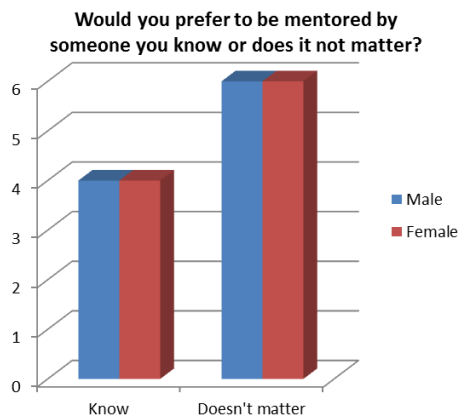
The data received from the interviews was mostly qualitative data, which meant that in order to analyse it effectively we had to quantify what data we had and display it in graphs, which would give a useful visual of our findings.

The full set of responses is in *Appendix 5*.

1. Our first question asked those who didn't want a mentor, to explain why. The graph shows that most students who didn't want a mentor, both male and female, prefer to work independently. The data also shows that females would be more likely to ask a teacher when help is needed rather than relying on a mentor.

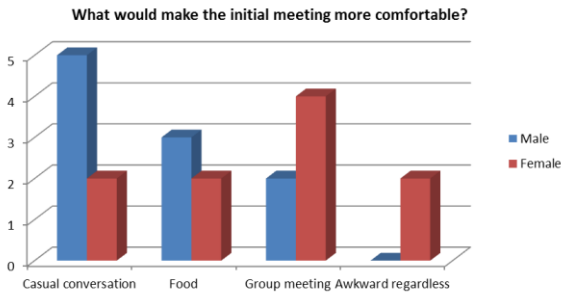


2. 60% of students said that it wouldn't matter whether they knew their mentor or not and 40% said they would prefer it to be someone they already knew.

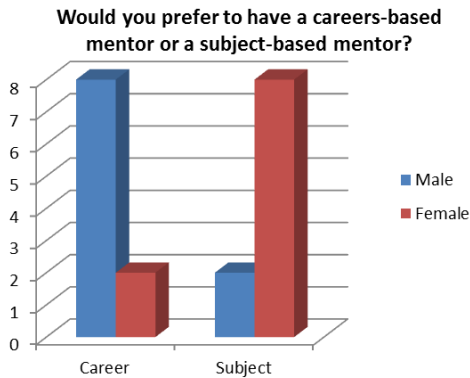


3. The third graph shows that people would feel more comfortable meeting their mentor when there is food, casual conversation or group meetings. Most male students said that casual conversation is most important with the initial meeting and

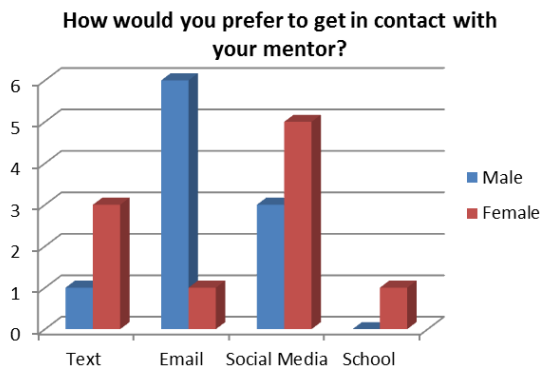
females said group meetings were a good way of making it less awkward. Only two females said that the initial meeting would be awkward regardless.



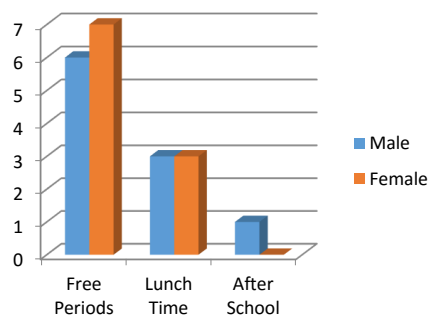
4. There was a large difference between the number of males and females when choosing whether their mentor would be subject-based or career-based. 80% of males said they wanted their mentor to be career-based compared to only 20% of females. The other 80% of females wanted a subject-based mentor compared to 20% of males. This provides an interesting challenge in meeting the requirements of male and female students within the same scheme.



5. Email and social media were the most common ways of wanting to get in touch with their mentor; females preferred social media and males preferred email. This seems to contrast with our findings from the questionnaire. However, a reasonable interpretation could be that it depends on how the mentoring relationship is progressing, i.e., first meeting arranged via social media/email, with subsequent meetings being arranged face-to-face.



6. Free periods were the most popular time to meet up with mentors because it would be convenient for everyone involved.



Evaluation

Overall the research project enabled us to gain a very good insight into the topic which we initially set out to research: whether a mentoring scheme for 6th formers would be beneficial, and if so what format would it need to take in order to be successful. However, having completed the research, it would be pertinent to evaluate the processes we used as objectively as possible.

Our evaluation is conducted using three monitors: practical issues, methodological issues and ethical issues.

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Previously to starting the project, the **knowledge** which the student researchers had of both conducting practical research and the subject matter (a possible mentoring scheme) was very limited. A steep learning curve ensued which was aided by two visits to the Institute of Education in order to identify key aspects of conducting good quality research

and writing up our findings. Independent research was also conducted to look into what a mentoring scheme might entail.

One major problem which we encountered was **attendance and commitment** from some of the student researchers. Only two of the researchers were involved throughout the whole process; we had issues of non-attendance, some researchers left RMGS midway through the research, others joined the project late. This necessitated changing numerous deadlines and was frustrating for the most committed members of the research group (*see Appendices 6 & 7*). However, ultimately, we do not feel that this reduced the quality of the research.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Students were informed of the purpose of the research and gave their implicit informed consent by completing the questionnaires and interviews. The individual identities of those who made comments on the Moodle questionnaire and those who were interviewed has been kept **confidential**. There are no ethical problems.

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METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Employing both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) methods of research and data analysis, we were able to check the reliability and validity of the data.

This technique known as **triangulation** proved valuable. The **reliability** of the data can be considered sound as we questioned the entire Year 12; issues of representativeness are not applicable. However, it must be acknowledged that the students varied in their degree of enthusiasm for completing the questionnaire. Arguably, a substantial number of students

had limited interest in completing the survey as in the last section, where there was an option to add any comments, less than 10 out of 150+ students actually developed their ideas on the subject. It could just be that they had nothing further to add, but it is also possible that they rushed the questionnaire, which could have affected our findings. Although ultimately, given the scale of the research and its representativeness, we can legitimately assume that our findings would be consistent if we repeated the research. In addition, the **validity** can be determined through the interviews which we conducted. As students were being interviewed by their peers, there is a chance that they gave the answers which they thought were desirable. However, it would be more likely that the data presents a true and accurate description of students' views on a mentoring scheme as it allowed them to put their views in their own words to another student who they felt comfortable and relaxed with, thus giving more honest and valid responses.

Conclusion and Implications

Our conclusion was that students felt a Mentoring Scheme for A Level students would be beneficial, given the right structure.

The '**ideal**' **Mentoring Scheme** would be:

- Subject based (especially important for girls); boys also saw the benefit of this, but additionally liked the idea of a careers-based mentor.
- Year 13 student would mentor a Year 12 student.

- Voluntary
- One-to-one basis
- Once a week meetings with mentor
- During allocated library periods or during free periods
- Face-to-face, rather than through social networking
- Initially facilitated by an informal group meeting to ease awkwardness