

USING A SPORTS COACH MENTOR TO ENGAGE CHILDREN IN YEAR 6 **-a case study in one Oxfordshire primary school**

Introduction: This report describes and evaluates an initiative at Sandhills Primary School, near Oxford, where the behaviour and level of engagement of the class of Year 6 children, especially a group of six boys, was a source of serious concern to staff and parents. This involved the employment of a Sports Coach Mentor working with that class for their remaining two terms at the school. The headteacher believed that this initiative had been very successful, and that an independent evaluation would highlight key lessons which might benefit other schools both within Oxfordshire and beyond. Dr Tony Eaude was commissioned to undertake this, with financial support from Oxfordshire County Council and the National Primary Centre. Dr Eaude was previously headteacher of an urban primary school in Oxford and is now an independent research consultant and Research Fellow, Department of Education, University of Oxford. He is the author of this report and queries or comments on it should be addressed to him at tony.eaude@education.ox.ac.uk. He wishes to thank all those who helped in the gathering of the evidence for their co-operation.

The evaluation was intended to highlight:

- what the Sports Coach Mentor did;
- in which specific respects the initiative was deemed to be successful;
- the factors leading to this success and difficulties encountered; and
- potential difficulties and the implications for other contexts.

After a description of the methodology and the context of the appointment, this report addresses each in turn, before drawing conclusions, taking into account the agendas relating to Raising Achievement, Inclusion and Workforce Remodelling.

Methodology: This report is based primarily on a one day visit to the school on July 8th 2008, which involved:

- semi-structured individual discussions with Oxfordshire's Head of Service (Young People and Access to Education), the headteacher, one of the two teachers who job-share the teaching of the class and the Sports Coach Mentor;
- semi-structured group discussions with three groups each of five children in the class, including some of those who had been the source of concern, and a group of four parents;
- a more informal discussion with both of the teachers of the class;
- some brief observation during lunchtime of how the Sports Coach Mentor interacted with the children; and
- examination of the documentation kept by the school about the initiative.

While the evidence base is therefore limited, it enables lessons to be drawn, although the importance of the context of a particular school and community and the individuals involved must be recognized in drawing more general conclusions.

The school context: Sandhills is a one-form entry primary school with about 190 pupils on roll. It serves a mixed catchment area, with some new housing for parents from professional and managerial backgrounds in an area where many children come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most recent Ofsted report rated it as satisfactory and the Oxfordshire Local Authority deems it effective.

The nature of the concern: The cohort of children which entered Year 6 in September 2007 had been a cause of concern throughout their time at the school. One unusual feature was that, though only some twenty-five children, this consisted of about two thirds

boys and one third girls. In the new academic year, the behaviour and level of engagement of the class - and of a group of six boys in particular - became such a serious source of concern that a group of parents contacted both the headteacher and Oxfordshire County Council. The two classteachers and the headteacher indicated that the class had become very difficult to teach, as the more disruptive children's behaviour, often with one or more other children prompted to join in, was affecting the learning environment. Documentary evidence from the Behaviour Support Team, the letters from parents and internal school records show how serious this was. This was re-inforced, albeit retrospectively, in discussions with staff, parents and children, despite praise for the two teachers who job-share the class. For example, one parent used the word 'erupted' and another suggested that it consisted of 'on-going low level disruption, with spikes' and one other adult 'more like a war-zone than a learning environment.' The responses of some of the more disruptive children in my discussions gave clues to the sorts of behaviour described. The head believed that something dramatic was needed to avoid a worsening spiral.

How this was addressed: As a result, following visits from the Behaviour Support Team, and further correspondence, the Head of Service (Young People and Access to Education) suggested that the headteacher might consider the employment of a Sports Coach Mentor. She indicated that a similar initiative had worked well in her previous role as headteacher with children, especially boys, of secondary school age with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The head decided to advertise for such a post, full time, on a temporary basis from January to July 2008 following discussions with the head of Meadowbrook College (the Pupil Referral Unit and Integration Service) who provided support with advice, job descriptions and a colleague to help with interviewing. As a result, four applications were received, and a young man who had recently finished at University, is keen on sport, having played rugby at a high level, and has been accepted for the army was appointed. While he is the son of one of the teachers at the school, this was said not to be a factor in his appointment. The Sports Coach Mentor was paid at slightly above the rate for other learning support staff. Although a vacancy had occurred as a lunchtime supervisor, the cost of the post was substantially more than simply replacing that person, despite the school having no financial reserves, a move described by the Head, with understatement, as a risk.

What the Sports Coach Mentor did: The Sports Coach Mentor (SCM) worked mainly with the whole class, but with a focus where necessary on the boys whose behaviour had proved particularly disruptive. When working in the classroom, under the supervision of the teachers, he occasionally took particular groups, and set up specific activities, but was, mostly, another adult available to support individuals or groups in their normal work. He had also accompanied the class on a residential visit and contributed to its success.

However, an important aspect of his work was to be present as the children arrived, to be on the playground at playtime and lunchtime, and to accompany the children as they went back inside. In this part of the role, especially, the SCM was required to work fairly autonomously. The testimony of the children was revealing with phrases such as: 'sits next to some people to help them concentrate and behave', 'helps people in class', 'plays with us outside', 'sets up games' and 'sorts out problems'. In terms of his relationship with the children, one child said that 'he's more like a friend, unlike teachers, and you can have a bit of a laugh', and he said, of playing with children, 'I could be more like their age'. In the head's words, 'they could more readily identify with him'.

The SCM, mostly, used similar rewards and sanctions to those used by other adults, including praise, re-inforcement and effort awards. Occasionally, the SCM used more tangible rewards such as chocolate. In practice, it appeared as if his presence frequently meant that he could pre-empt difficulties and withdraw those involved to resolve disputes,

to the benefit of those children and of the rest of the class. When other sanctions were required, this was referred to one of the teachers or headteacher, as appropriate. This role enabled him, especially at points of transition, both to pre-empt trouble and to deal with it before it affected the whole class. For example, both the SCM and the children highlighted his role in playing with the children and acting as umpire or arbitrator. And he was observed, at the end of lunchtime, talking with a child who was upset and hiding in a bush, but who was, within a few minutes, incorporated back in the class without the rest of the children being disrupted.

In which respects can this initiative be deemed to be successful: The lack of explicit success criteria makes it necessary to judge the success of this initiative against success criteria which were implicit. However, it may be that this lack of explicitness enabled a flexibility which contributed to its success.

The main reason for the SCM's appointment was to improve the learning environment for the whole class. All the evidence suggested that the behaviour of the class had become much more settled. For example, the headteacher said that he was now rarely called in, whereas previously this had been some two or three times a week. The teachers, without suggesting that the class was easy, said that teaching was now possible. The parents said that their children had reported far less disruption, a pattern confirmed both the children, both those who had been most disruptive and others. The other children, in particular, were vocal in saying how the changed environment had enabled them to learn. Especially important had been the reduction in constant, low-level disruption.

The children and teacher, especially, highlighted the benefit of improved playtimes, both in itself, for instance in itself with comments such as 'most people enjoy playtime now' and 'there is less bullying'; and in enabling a prompt and settled start after breaks. The difficulties which had previously spilled over into the classroom were largely pre-empted or resolved with disrupting the rest of the class.

While it is impossible to know definitively the effect of this improved learning environment on levels of attainment, and the results of the national tests were at that point only available in provisional form, the testimony of the class teacher was powerful in indicating that 'we were concerned that the children's levels would not be realized, but they were.'

While the presence of the SCM seemed to a decisive factor in this change, his evidence and that of the teachers suggested that the effect on individuals in the disruptive group was uneven. For example, one boy who had been disruptive supported the evidence of the adults that the attention of the SCM and a much system of specific targets and rewards had really helped him improve his behaviour, so that he no longer needed these. However, the teacher thought that two or three of the group needed 'more containing'; a view supported by the SCM. The other children also benefited. One parent spoke of how the presence of the SCM had boosted her daughter's confidence and self-esteem which had suffered previously. The head spoke about the improvement in the children's demeanour and how they felt about themselves. There is little doubt that this initiative was successful in the specific context in which the school found itself, requiring immediate action to avoid a rapidly worsening situation. The next section attempts to pinpoint the key factors contributing to success.

Factors contributing to success: In considering the factors, this section looks first at those related to the role and then those related to the individual, notably age, gender, educational background and personal qualities.

The length of appointment: One factor on which it is hard to make a definitive judgement is

the temporary nature of the role. In the circumstances, there is little doubt that this appointment provided a decisive intervention at a point where this was required. In considering whether a learning support assistant could have been deployed with the same level of success, the head and teachers were convinced that the novelty and distinctiveness of the role were important factors in its success. However, there was some indication that the impact may have reduced towards the end of his time, though the dynamics of a Year 6 class towards the end of their time at primary school complicates this.

The nature of the role: One key aspect of the SCM's role was his involvement with children during playtime and lunchtime, enabling him to pre-empt difficulties, for example by setting up and structuring games, and deal with problems immediately. The sports element, and games more generally, supported this informally whereas an emphasis on art or music, for instance, would necessarily focus more on specific organized activities. This more general role, rather than working specifically with those who were most disruptive, had the benefit of supporting the whole class, although inevitably the most disruptive boys took up much of his time. The element of the role related to mentoring on pastoral and behavioural issues, with a responsibility related to the whole class rather than specific individuals, was very important. While the sports and games element provided an excellent route into such a role, the wider emphasis on learning and behaviour had benefits far beyond sport. In the head's view 'the sports (aspect) was a means to an end'. This supports the view of one father that mentoring through sport, though underused in schools, has the potential to engage many disaffected children, and especially boys.

Age: Both the SCM and the children thought that his age, 22, was important. For instance, shared interests in terms of television programmes, music and sports such as wrestling provided areas of common interest - and both he and the children welcomed the different interactions and relationship that these helped to create, suggesting that this would not occur with someone significantly older.

Gender: While the SCM appointed was a man, the original advert did not stipulate gender and the shortlist included both men and women. The teachers, children and parents all thought that his being a man was very important in offering a positive role model, especially for the more disruptive boys. One father spoke of this being 'massive' and one teacher highlighted the benefit for some boys, especially, where positive male role models are absent. However, she also cautioned against making simplistic assumptions, emphasising that he demonstrated many good qualities and that these were more important than gender, *per se*.

Educational background: The SCM thought that the challenges that he had faced in learning, and his success in overcoming these to gain a degree, helped him to relate to some of the children who found learning challenging. The teachers agreed that the combination of a young man interested in, and successful at, sport and 'someone on the ball academically' provided a positive message to the class. For example, he had taken in and discussed his c.v. with the children to help them understand how his own learning had developed.

Personal qualities: While the factors highlighted above were all seen as important, the evidence repeatedly highlighted the personal qualities which he exhibited, such as being positive, open-minded, willing and 'strict but fair'. The combination of flexibility and firmness and of an ability to act autonomously but maintaining the expectations of the school were what made a relationship which could have become 'over-friendly' one which earned respect, rather than being taken advantage of.

In summary, the specific focus with its emphasis on the mentor element and on playtimes and lunchtimes and possible points of conflict seems to have been extremely important. The opportunity for relationships with children which are different from, but complementary to, those made by teachers may be enhanced by factors such as age, gender and educational background but the boundaries of such relationships need careful consideration. Therefore, the sorts of personal quality exhibited by the SCM and described above are deemed the most important factors contributing to success.

Potential difficulties and the implications for other contexts: It may be tempting to conclude that appointing a well-educated young man to such a role is the solution to similar situations, especially where a group of boys is disrupting a class. However, the success of the initiative, on which there was wide agreement, should not obscure some concerns and potential difficulties in other contexts or with different people.

Relationship with the children: One possible difficulty is the nature of the SCM's relationship with the children. While the adults in the school welcomed his role in a particular difficult situation, both the teachers and the SCM himself agreed that he started working with the class with no prior training and little discussion about the exact nature of his role. For example, the children thought that he had replaced a midday supervisor and the parents indicated that they had not been informed, although they were delighted that he had been appointed. The teachers would have welcomed more discussion; for example there had been some disagreement about whether he should be called by his first name, which distinguished him from the other adults in the school. In the event, he was, which both reflected and created a different type of relationship more akin to that of a youth worker. The SCM and the children welcomed the rather different relationship between an adult and children from those open to teachers. However, without the personal qualities which the SCM displayed, this could easily have led to overfamiliarity and undermined the authority of the teacher. While this evolved successfully in practice, an initial lack of clarity could provide scope for the type of relationship formed to be inappropriate, especially given the emphasis of the role of working outside the classroom.

Gender and age stereotypes: A second danger is the perception that appointing an athletic young man as a Sports Coach Mentor in a primary school may re-inforce stereotypes that:

- sport is a male activity and women teachers cannot teach PE well; or
- only men can provide the discipline which disruptive boys require.

However, in this case, both teachers enjoy teaching PE and, by all accounts, do so well and while sports provided a very good way of involving the children, success was based less on sport in itself than as a route into a more general mentoring role. And the flexibility of his role, allied with the SCM's particular qualities, seemed more important than his gender as such. So, any such appointment should be clear about what the 'sports' element consists of and should support, rather than replace, existing ways of promoting good behaviour.

Cost: A third question is whether such an appointment represents 'value for money', costing as it did about £6,500 - which the school could ill afford. The head's willingness to take such a risk is an indication of the seriousness of the problem. The evidence suggests that the risk was well worth it. In similar situations, such an initiative may be effective as a short-term response. However, as the Head of Service suggested, the more pertinent question, in more normal circumstances, is whether such an appointment may be worth considering, where a Sports Coach Mentor should take on a role currently undertaken by a less specialized member of the learning support staff. This question, especially relevant in the context of Workforce Remodelling, is discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion: There is little doubt that this initiative was successful in the particular context of the school. External support from those in the Local Authority provided a good model, notably for the school to adapt a role used mainly in secondary schools for the older end of the primary phase. All of those interviewed confirmed that this appointment had helped to break a pattern of behaviour and disengagement which was seriously disrupting the learning environment of the class, and, at times, making it almost unmanageable. The Sports Coach Mentor's age and gender was important in enabling both the more disruptive boys to be included and, in many ways more importantly, other children's education not to be disrupted. The emphasis on the mentor element and on being with children at playtimes, lunchtimes and points of transition, to pre-empt and deal with behavioural difficulties, was vital; and the focus on sport and games is likely to be a very useful 'way-in' with disruptive groups, especially boys. A flexible approach, responsive to children's immediate needs, seemed more valuable than a specific programme of activities.

It is worth considering whether such a role, usually associated with secondary schools, may be appropriate on a more permanent basis in primary schools, especially in the context of Workforce Remodelling. Many primary schools have used learning support staff for supervision especially at lunchtimes. Learning mentors have usually only been employed in primary schools in very disadvantaged areas, for instance through the Excellence in Cities programme. This initiative suggests that primary schools could valuably extend the role of at least some learning support staff into one more akin to that of mentor, including a supervisory and pre-emptive element at times when difficulties are most likely to arise. This may be especially appropriate where behavioural difficulties impact adversely on the learning environment. It may help to extend the range of skills and alter the profile of age and gender of learning support staff, at little or no additional cost, where existing staff levels are maintained, but allocating responsibilities differently. However, especially where such an appointment is longer-term, making age, gender or educational background essential criteria would be, in my view, misguided, though one or more may, in specific contexts, be desirable. Likely to matter more are the qualities of the individual, rather than age, gender or educational background, as such. The nature of the role and what it is hoped to achieve needs careful thought, with implications for induction and training and the nature of the relationship between adult and children. Given this, such appointments should be considered as a good way of enabling greater levels of inclusion and raising standards of attainment.

August 2008