

Planning for the implementation of Foundation Learning

Case study

How building positive group identity can help learners to achieve success

‘Our engagement with Foundation Learning was a must to meet the needs of some of our learners. Personalisation of learning is a key component of the Churchfields curriculum, which starts from before transition to beyond leaving at 16. It has given learners a flexible and uniquely designed learning programme to match their learning needs. It will create life chances and progression that we did not have before we took on board the philosophy of Foundation Learning.’

Deputy Head, Churchfields School

Introduction

The learners identified for this pilot phase were young people who lacked supportive peer relationships. This case study records approaches to building a positive group identity that would see achievement as part of the group characteristics.

Provider profile

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| Name of organisation | Churchfields |
| Location | Swindon, Wiltshire |
| Contact | Mandy White, Foundation Learning Coordinator |
| Type of organisation involved in the case study | 11–16 Foundation Secondary School |
| Approximate number of staff involved in the case study | 10 |
| Approximate number of learners involved in the case study | 13 Year 10 learners |
| Level of experience at the start of the pilot | Churchfields began to part-deliver Foundation Learning in September 2008 as part of the Swindon pilot with BTEC Workskills and mathematics functional skills. |

Aims and intended outcomes

- The creation of a curriculum that would meet the learners' needs – something that is difficult in the current curriculum.
- Give opportunities for accredited achievement to learners with low expectations of nationally recognised achievement.
- Provide an opportunity to explore and develop the ideas within Foundation Learning, so the school could make an informed decision about wider long-term implementation.

Background

There was a lot of interest in the pilot from young people and parents. It would have been possible to run several groups. With the young men, the issues were more about social isolation and low self-esteem, whereas the young women presented as more confident, but were struggling with big personal issues, often at home. For all of them the issues of self-esteem and emotional instability were the largest barriers to successful achievement, so an approach that built a strong group identity was chosen. This led to a decision to keep the learners as a group for the majority of their learning across the curriculum.

The school made the decision that the learners' greatest need was to belong to a supportive, 'safe' group that had a strong ethos of success. They began with the group identity-building work and the first step was to build teacher-learner rapport and ensure that learners understood the aims of the course.

A BTEC Diploma in Work Skills was chosen as the central qualification to work towards throughout Key Stage 4. It was not possible to offer vocational tasters or blocks of work experience, so a practical, experiential range of learning that would be motivating and engaging was designed. It was not possible to personalise in terms of preferred vocational skills or placement, so the school chose to involve local businesses. While all the learners were engaged in the same range of activities, the learning goals were personalised, so within all the group activities, each one of them knew what individual learning goals they were working towards. In order to achieve a Diploma they needed to complete most of the units available, but the school managed to ensure that there was something relevant to each of them within each unit.

Implementation

Both staff and learners spent the first six weeks on building the group identity and demonstrating how achievement could be accumulated. They started with carefully selected smaller established friendship groups, and then when learners really knew and trusted each other within the small groups, gradually moved around until good supportive relationships were developing across them all. These initial activities to build group cohesion were based on a resource called Impact Interchoice. Starting with self-awareness activities in groups of two or four, this led to rearranging groups based on observed strengths and weaknesses.

Other activities included a self-portrait exercise where learners shared how they saw themselves in and out of school. It transpired that a large percentage of them were socially isolated in their home lives, and this had led in the past to isolation at school. A useful activity on the subject of bullying proved to be the creation of a presentation on 'the best time I had with a person who is special to me'. Staff were involved in all the exercises as a step towards building trust. Some of the units in the qualification provided accreditation for these activities, and a detailed curriculum to underpin it was developed.

The priority was to take every opportunity to stress the value and real possibility of achievement. The individual learners needed to experience success, and success that required them to support each other. Gradually the group tackled activities that were more demanding, which required real inter-group cooperation to build on early achievements.

Successes

Some of the activities were particularly successful. They were assignment-based, and in some cases took several weeks. It was ensured that the self-esteem building activities were included in all the assignment activities.

The mini-enterprise assignment was very successful. It required a range of skills that met requirements for the particular unit ('Producing a product' T/501/5940) as well as aspects of functional skills. It focused on planning, designing and producing a finished product. Without the initial teambuilding work, this would have been very difficult.

Another successful activity was preparing for being interviewed, which started with a lot of practical preparation work in class, including learners being interviewers, observing other people being interviewed, then going out for a range of 'real' interviews with local employers.

With all the activities, reflecting on what has been learnt is often more valuable than the work itself and required a level of trust between individual members of the group that had not been present at the beginning of the programme.

The other factors that ensured success were the detailed preparation of materials, timing, and working closely in drawing up a brief for employers. A lot of work with local employers has been successful, but it has required a great deal of development work with them. All learners have achieved significant numbers of units already and are on course to complete their Diplomas. The effect of this is very evident in terms of raised self-esteem, as evidenced by learners' own words and those of parents.

Challenges

The biggest challenge was that the project had to hit the ground running. It had not been possible to do the information, advice and guidance (IAG), assessment and individual learning plan production before starting, so the learners were not fully prepared for what they were going to experience. Intensive work in the first few weeks ensured this issue was overcome. Another challenge was the fact that the success of the project relied on only one teacher and one assistant. This was very demanding, and carried the risk that there could be personality clashes. However this did not happen and all the learners developed good relationships with both staff.

Impact and outcomes

The greatest impact has been on the learners. These learners were disengaged, not motivated to learn, and lacked supportive peer relationships. Since the project began, learners have exhibited more positive behaviour:

- Standing up for each other, and intervening if one of the learners is being bullied. This is new behaviour.
- Helping each other with their individual work – noticing when another needs help and intervening without prompting from staff.
- Some of the group have agreed to be prefects in Year 11 and have been encouraged by their peers.
- Individuals have already gained a sense of achievement, of a future in learning, and a sense of belonging to a successful group of their peers.
- It has affected the families of learners, many of whom are constantly providing feedback that their son or daughter is a changed person.

'It's cool, better than I thought. It's great because there's always time to catch up.'

Learner

'I've already got some units, and the qualification is equivalent to GCSEs, and that's great.'

Learner

'We help each other, one group helps another group to learn ... I'm on my way!'

Learner

'We've got really close, and you don't worry about showing yourself up.'

Learner

'I'm getting a sense of achievement, I really think I can do stuff well.'

Learner

'These young people have had an educational lifetime of non-achievement. This is giving them the belief that they can achieve, and to know that people see value in lots of skills, not just academic ones.'

Mandy, Foundation Learning Coordinator

'It's been incredible to watch them grow and develop since September, from being completely disengaged to realising they can do well, and get and give support to each other.'

Penny, teaching assistant

'Hello again Miss White,

I have just been talking to Jason about the trip to the oasis, it sounds great. I am so pleased Jason is doing this course this year. It has done him the world of good and I would recommend it to anyone. I hope that Jason does his part.'

Extract of letter from learner's parents

'The strategy we have adopted works extremely well. Mandy works with the learners from the September until the following January. By the time I meet them they are fully aware of the parameters to work within and Mandy has influenced the individuals' personalities to work as a team. This enables me quickly to focus on the learners' needs regarding communication, confidence, self-esteem and working with adults in business situations.'

Labyrinth Training Limited (Employer Partner)

Lessons learnt

Finding ways of ensuring success for everyone in the group helped to reinforce the group identity and built on it by developing the image of a success-orientated group. In this way the group identity played a positive role in ensuring achievement and in the learners valuing their own success. One such resource has proved to be the online portal Guroo that has been produced to support the delivery of functional skill (FS) at all levels. It is considered to be very accessible for teachers and learners and, along with the paper-based resource Skills Builders, has contributed significantly to FS success for all learners.

Conclusions and next steps

The emphasis on building supportive relationships between the learners is a significant contributing factor to learners' success. The future for this group will include more integration with other learners in Year 11 and will test how robust their improved self-esteem is. It is planned that they will be integrated with groups of other learners for GCSE/FS, and it will be a challenge to support them when they are in a less 'sheltered' learning environment. It is hoped that the work of this current year proves to be successful and promotes a more inclusive mix of learners. The new year 10 learners will also learn their FS in mixed groups of learners, so the self-esteem building and group identity work will be restricted to the specific BTEC WorkSkills sessions. Again, it will be valuable to observe their development and compare with the current year, who have studied a greater amount of their curriculum as one discrete group.