

Peer support for rural young people:

Seminar held on 22 March 2002, Ambleside



Introduction

The conference was set up to focus on how peer support could address the needs of rural young people. Participants attending included those involved in youth work, education, voluntary agencies and mental health services. A group of peer supporters from Alfred Barrow and Carnforth High Schools also took part. The discussion was set within a wider framework as the young people taking part did not identify with the 'rural' label (thought to detract from 'street-cred'), while other participants felt that many of the issues also related to other groups of young people, such as those leaving care.

Two key themes were explored:

- ◆ How can peer support processes in schools address the emotional and social support needs of everyone?
- ◆ How can peer support processes in schools provide young people with opportunities to deal with whatever issues come up for them? (There was a feeling that peer support is so strongly identified as a way of dealing with bullying that it often does not allow for the exploration of other, equally important, issues.)

What are the main issues for young people in rural communities?

There are several issues facing young people growing up in rural communities. Firstly, they do not have access to the same levels of social and recreational provision as those who live in cities, and transport links may be poor. Also, while they may experience the benefits associated with living in fairly cohesive communities, social policing may restrict choices and make it difficult to talk about feelings. Another crucial factor is the trauma suffered by rural communities as a result of the recent foot and mouth epidemic, of seeing livestock killed and livelihoods all but destroyed. This has directly affected not only farming families, but also those in the haulage and leisure businesses. The emotional reverberations have affected entire communities and may well be felt for years to come.

Peer support: concerns and solutions

Participants discussed concerns about the effectiveness of peer support for rural and other isolated groups of young people, and explored how these could be addressed.

- ◆ Young people with limited social or intellectual skills may be less likely than others to make use of peer support services, or to become peer supporters. Hence, considerable effort needs to be put into ensuring that peer supporters represent the diversity of the school's social groupings, so that any individual looking at the support 'team' can feel that there are people with whom they can identify.
- ◆ Peer support activities are generally not organised in a way that allows young people to ask for support through distressing emotional experiences that they feel unable to talk about – either because they lack verbal skills, or because the experiences are too 'raw'. To help combat this, activities could be set up that allow for the development of a sense of emotional connection to others, even where no problem is identified.
- ◆ The confidentiality of a peer support programme is less easy to maintain in small schools and isolated communities. Hence it is important find quiet, secluded places for peer support activities. Routes to these places may need to be policed to prevent them being lined by bullies and others.
- ◆ Peer support is often not seen as sufficiently 'cool' to make it attractive to boys. However, in one local school, a charismatic 'male' teacher has given peer support 'street cred'.
- ◆ If peer support focuses exclusively on bullying, it does not create a space for other emotional and relationship issues to be addressed. Schools can find a way around this by exploring with young people some of the other issues that affect their emotional and social development. After discussing these with peer supporters, it could be advertised around the school that peer support can tackle these issues. It was noted that the Alfred Barrow School links with the schools council and class councils system, which helps to address this problem.

- ◆ Generally, too little of the value that peer supporters gain from involvement in the scheme is available to those who do not become peer supporters. Training in appropriate areas, such as listening and communication skills, should be offered to all pupils. At a school in Leeds, one teacher offers peer support activities to everyone in Year 9, some of whom then volunteer in Year 10 to become peer supporters.
- ◆ Teachers who lack effective support themselves are likely to block young people's access to peer support. Presentations to the whole school staff can increase their understanding of how peer support works and what its value might be in making their jobs easier. Ultimately, teachers need peer support as much as young people do.

Who should be involved?

An ideal situation would be one where everyone in a school saw themselves as potentially a provider of support to others. This would not happen only vertically. People might give support to those who were older than them, if that seemed appropriate. School staff and parents might become involved as well. It was felt that too many peer support systems followed a hierarchical model which could prevent innovative alternatives being developed.

What appears to be best practice and why?

The most effective peer support systems are those where the pressure to set them up has emerged internally, from young people recognising a need and then thinking about how it can most effectively be addressed. For instance, the Carnforth High School programme was set up by three girls who were being bullied and decided to do something about it. One danger presented by the work of the Forum is that, in promoting peer support, schemes

will be developed where people are not clear as to why they are needed.

Effective peer support schemes will lead to other activities, as people in the school become more sensitively attuned to the emotional and social needs of young people, and more concerned to find ways of tackling these. Good peer support is never just for 'kids with problems.'

Recommendations

- ◆ Those setting up new peer support schemes, or looking for ways to develop one that is already in operation, need to be offered a 'basket of ideas' about how they might go about doing this. In assembling this, efforts need to be made to communicate what is idiosyncratic and particular about the work of specific groups of people – encouraging others to do it 'their own way'.
- ◆ It would be useful to develop an internet-based audit tool to help people think about the particular factors in their school, and how these might affect the effectiveness of a peer support programme.
- ◆ Accreditation systems for peer supporters should emphasise the value of the support experience in developing many of the skills needed for a successful working life. This would help to ensure that peer support comes to be properly valued.
- ◆ Evidence is needed to show the potential value of peer support in ensuring young people are 'ready to learn'.

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November 2002

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