Sense College
Dereham Resource Centre Case Study

Sense College

Sense College is an Independent Specialist College (ISC), operating over 8 sites in the East Midlands and the East of England. It is part of the national 'Sense' parent organisation, a registered charity for deafblind people.

All 175 learners are either deafblind with additional learning disabilities or single sensory impaired with additional learning disabilities. Our data indicates that 70% of learners have profound & multiple disabilities. The learners are supported by a team of over 200 Sense staff with specialist support available in-house or externally, dependent upon the needs of each individual.

Our learners are all very complex, and therefore staff need a high level of specialist skills in order to be able to work effectively with them. Staff are specially trained to work with individuals with a Multi Sensory Impairment (MSI) and associated learning disabilities and can therefore tailor learning to suit individual needs. In particular, training focuses on the development of a total communication approach[1]. Staff use specialist approaches and resources to support access to learning.

The LSIS resources we used:

We chose 3 resource centres to participate in this project. We reviewed the LSIS mentoring resources and decided which ones would work best for us. These were;

- Mentoring presentation
- Mentoring guidance
- Mentoring agreement
- The initial mentor meeting
- Mentor general review
- Mentor periodic partnership review
- Post meeting reflections

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[1] A total communication approach – using a variety of communication methods such as verbal, British Sign Language (BSL), Makaton, Objects of Reference, pictures and symbols to support communication.

- Peer mentor confidentially statement
- Peer mentor record for one on one
- Peer mentor boundaries
- Peer mentor training log
- Reasons not to give advice

Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) at the three locations (about 25) were given an overview of the mentoring process and associated documentation, using the resources to facilitate discussion. The reaction was very positive. Everyone was keen to get started, as they could remember how daunted they felt when they first started supporting learners with profound and complex needs. Mentoring partnerships were negotiated and we were ready to start.

Our approach

We made up a "starting" pack for each mentee/mentor, with a choice of documents, which they could use and or adapt, depending how their mentor meetings progressed. Mentoring meetings took place monthly and staff were able to build this in around their learner commitments. As the mentoring programme developed, staff were able to see the benefits and finding time to meet became something they wanted to do rather than something they had to do.

An example of the outcome and impact of the work

Toby recently applied for the post of full time learning support assistant. Having worked in I.T. for a number of years, he had decided that he wanted a complete career change. He was successful at interview and was offered the job. Although delighted, Toby was not confident that he had the relevant skills or knowledge for the role. He considered declining the post, until he was reassured that he would be appointed a mentor, who would be there to support him, answer everyday questions and "look out" for him. This was instrumental in him accepting the job.

Toby explains….

> "The LSAs have a huge pool of informal knowledge, they know how things work, where things are and all the day to day things which make the college tick; from little things like where's the key for the COSSH cupboard, to seeking advice about how to provide effective support to an individual learner. Having a named person as my mentor meant I could ask them and not feel silly. I was given fantastic support. I had someone to go to whenever I was unsure. We also sat down together and had slightly more formal meetings which were recorded. This was useful because my mentor answered as many questions as possible and anything she wasn't able to answer, she referred to the appropriate person.
> My mentor also checked my induction training to make sure I had completed it and helped me to identify and access any other specialist training relevant to my role."

The impact ?

> "Well it helped so much to make me feel part of the team. I felt included straight away and I learnt about the general duties and my responsibilities fairly quickly. I think when most people start a new job, they feel quite anxious and lacking in confidence while they struggle to learn the ropes – having a mentor helps build up confidence and conquer fears.
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> I enjoy working for an Independent Specialist College and having a mentor has really increased my confidence. As a result of my positive experience, I have now decided to work towards becoming a Curriculum Tutor (CT). Even though I haven't been here long I have already completed my Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) course and when a part time tutor role became vacant I applied for it. I was successful and now I am a tutor for 2 days and an LSA for 3 days, and about to start my Diploma for Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS)
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> I really value the mentor support I had when I started working and would recommend mentoring to others."

Toby's manager says

> "The mentoring programme has been a great success. It has helped new staff to settle in and understand their role, but more significantly, it has helped to accelerate staff development. Toby has not been here very long but he is a shining example of the mentoring programme."

Next steps and future plans

Mentoring sessions have been instrumental in supporting new staff to become more confident in their role. The college will continue to use this programme as a way forward to guide and support all new LSAs. As the pilot has been such a success, we will ensure it is rolled out to all our Centres. We will also plan to introduce other alternative approaches to CPD - Learn and Share, Shadowing and Buddying.

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