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Peer mentoring and autism in school: an interview with Ryan Bradley

Can you tell us how you first became interested in autism?

Yeah, well I think it's probably happy coincidence we're in Edinburgh; I was a student here about twenty years ago, and my...I had a fantastic tutor called Colwyn Trevarthen; he was researching children with autism, got me interested and engaged and ended up doing my thesis on it and then kind of going into education as a teacher and researcher following that so yeah, it's probably been about twenty, twenty five years.

Can you tell us about your current work?

Things I'm doing at the moment is a study on peer mentoring in secondary schools. So really, to look at I suppose what it's like for a student with autism to be a peer mentor, cause that's something that doesn't normally happen; normally they're the student being mentored. So I sort of developed a new programme and that was implemented in five mainstream secondary schools, and I was just looking at the impact of that based on the student with autism, the other peer mentors and the staff in school, to see what kind of factors were important in developing that type of approach in secondary schools.

Can peer mentoring work for those who don't disclose their diagnosis?

Disclosures are really personal issues, a number of factors that affect that so I think the age at which a young person's diagnosed, the prior experiences, whether that's been good or bad, the amount of support they get post-diagnosis, the information they get, and equally what support their family get, and then what support school get in terms of understanding that individual and how to meet their needs, so all those factors are really key things which I think there needs to be more work on to make it more consistent. In terms of peer mentoring, I think if a child has got to the point where they're accepting or they want to know more, then it can be a really sort

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of safe, supportive environment. But in terms of my model, everyone was a peer mentor for each other, so four children, non-autistic students and one autistic student, so it was a chance to discuss individual differences for all of them, so I think it did lead to more acceptance and understanding for all students, about all their differences, not just the child with autism.

What are the benefits of using a peer mentoring approach for all students?

Yeah, I think, well in terms of my study, for students with autism, I think there were several key findings, one of the big ones was the reduction levels of bullying experienced by them, say there were twelve students, autistic students involved in the programme, across five different schools, and cause of the programme which ran for about six months, there was a really significant decrease in the amount of bullying that went on; I think 10 out of the 12 were bullied prior to the programme and only one child was bullied subsequently as the programme went on. It also improved their sort of levels of social satisfaction, and actually feeling more included and part of school life, and as I said earlier, you know, it actually gave them that different role, so not only were they seeing others as sources of help and support, actually they... that was kind of generalised to normal classroom situations as well, so they were actually all able to interact and ask for help if they needed it, but it also gave them that opportunity to be a source of support and help for other people. So they were kind of four key things for students with autism, but again for the students, normal autistic students, those things were really similar as well; they equally benefited from the model, I think the key thing was that the staff coordinating the programme got to know that individual or the individual students really well and that built up a much more trusting relationship, which was really beneficial moving forward, because the students were all in Year 7, so their first year of secondary school, so actually I think supported their transition into sort of school life as they went through into the next phase of education, really.

What are the limitations of using a peer mentoring approach for all students?

We know not every approach is going to meet the needs of every child. So, it was kind of self-selecting, all the peer mentors of the volunteers, they didn't, they weren't made to do this, and I think that's kind of again, another issue with students with autism; often they're told they have to do a programme, or they have to do an approach, they don't really get much of a say in what that looks like, or even whether they want to do it or not. So it's voluntary, and I think that's a key thing, so if they want to be engaged in this, you know, they've got the opportunity to do so, but I think a lot of limitations around practical implementations, so whether staff had enough time to do the groups, whether senior management were on board with it, which made a huge difference in terms of how the programmes kind of, or there was wider exposure of the programme to the rest of the staff, yeah, and I think I suppose ultimately it's got to be valued by the whole staff, otherwise it's not really going to be that effective.

What would be your key advice to develop a more inclusive environment for autistic children?

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It's obviously a complex issue. I think, for me, there's probably three key things, so the first would be making sure that senior management of a school are on board, so what we want is a strategic overview, we want to create autism-friendly schools, and that has to come from the top, really, that has to come from senior management, because I think they set the ethos and the values of schools, so I think that's really important thing as a starting point. And that includes kind of the curriculum offer for the student, so actually, are they providing a very narrow academic curriculum, which I think there's a lot of pressure to do that at the moment, or are they providing a broader-based curriculum that are going to meet other needs, around social or emotional or physical needs that means they're actually valuing every student and really providing an inclusive environment for them.

I think the second thing is staff training, so we've got the idea, the senior management on board and actually we need practical day-to-day, strategies and things implemented in school to enable students with autism to access learning opportunities fully. I think the starting point for that is understanding and awareness; we need to tell staff, or staff to understand, sorry, how, why they're doing things, because I think if they don't understand why they're doing them, they're not going to do them, or it's not really going to be very effective, then we need to give them the strategy and understanding of things to do on a practical basis to support the students.

So I think those two things are quite key in terms of actual school and staffing. I think probably the most important thing for me is enabling and listening to the voice of the students themselves and their families. I think if we can do that, because I think, you know, really, it starts with the individual, so if we build those trusting relationships, we listen to them, we understand where they're coming from and their needs, we're going to be much more effective at putting strategies and support in place to enable them to succeed at school. 11