

Raising attainment and widening horizons.

Improving the life chances of white working class boys through leadership development and mentoring.

Lowton Church of England High School
Dioceses of Liverpool and Manchester

Context

Lowton Church of England High School is a smaller than average secondary school serving a predominantly white working class community in the north west. Lowton became a Church school in 2012 and it is a joint high school between Manchester and Liverpool dioceses.

Since becoming a Church school, Lowton has developed an ethos of 'Caring, Learning and Succeeding', based on Matthew 5:14-16:

‘You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven.’

In spite of this ethos, staff at Lowton recognised that many of the boys in the school were struggling to succeed and aspirations were often low. National statistics show that white working class boys are less likely to move onto further or higher education and this was reflected in the destination data of the pupils at Lowton. Whilst wanting to continue to value vocational routes, the school wanted to change pupils’ mindset, helping them to think about career *pathways* rather short term employment.

Pupil leadership roles at Lowton were also less likely to be taken up by this group, with many of the boys lacking in self-confidence and self-belief to take up these positions. Lowton wanted to initiate a project to try and improve the life chances of these boys – to enable them to see that Further and Higher Education is an option for them and to empower them to take the initiative, believe in themselves and succeed.

The project

Lowton applied for an Unlocking Gifts grant to work with a selected group of middle attainment boys from disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their attainment and

aspirations. They used the funding to take a multi-faceted approach that incorporated peer mentoring, a growth mindset development programme, leadership development and opportunities for the boys to engage with further and higher education institutions. The project was led first by the head of RE and then by the newly appointed chaplain, as the school wanted the boys to experience working with a Christian leader who could mentor and guide them.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Develop the skills of communication and team-work essential for success in the workplace
- Raise aspiration through career guidance
- Improve self-esteem and self-worth
- Improve attainment to enable success post-16
- Develop relationships with the local Christian community, including local churches and charities.

The first term of the project period was used to carefully select the first cohort, based on analysis of pupil data and consideration of which pupils would best come together to create positive group dynamics. 13 year 10 boys were selected and the project began with an official launch day. Using weekly form tutor time, the Chaplain engaged the group in leadership training, looking at teamwork, communication and what it means to be a good leader. Alongside this, the pupils also took part in outdoor based team building days to develop their resilience and problem solving. They also benefitted from careers meetings and, in the second year of the project, training to become peer mentors to younger pupils.

Using some of the Unlocking Gifts grant, an external provider was brought in to run the first



peer mentoring programme with the first cohort of boys (who were now in year 11). Despite some struggles along the way, mostly due to the provider not being used to working with high energy boys and some of the pupils struggling to engage in the reflective conversations, all the boys completed the training and went on to help train the next cohort. After this external provision the chaplain created a bespoke peer mentoring package to fit the needs of

Lowton's pupils. This not only addressed some of the issues with the external package, but it also helped to ensure the project was sustainable and could be continued beyond the two years of funding.

The project team learnt and adapted their approach as the project progressed. After using a launch event for the first cohort, they decided a 'fanfare' approach was not effective and did not reflect the need to create a bespoke programme that met the diverse needs of the group. The team also recognised the need for each cohort to have leaders who are not part of the group - to act as role models and provide inspiration.

What worked

Lowton have seen a number of positive outcomes from the project. In feeling valued by staff and knowing that they were being invested in, the boys' self-esteem grew and generally their engagement with the programme was strong. The time spent at the start of the project identifying the cohort proved to be time well spent as the boys bonded well as a group and enjoyed being together. As well as becoming a strong



friendship group, the boys' cooperation skills and communication skills improved. Rather than interacting only in short statements, the boys started engaging in longer, more respectful conversations, showing significant improvement in their 'soft skills'. In exit interviews the boys commented that their self-esteem had been helped through the group:

There are people in our group who have really come out of their shell and have gained leadership qualities.

I really enjoyed being one of the few chosen to be a part of Unlocking Gifts. It has improved my role model skills and communication with others. It's given me the sense of being part of a community.

(Quotes from pupils involved in the project)

Whilst the majority of the selected pupils engaged well with the group activities, a few of the boys struggled with this due to a lack in fundamental social skills, low self-esteem and the influence of some outside friendship groups which undermined the aspirant attitude the project was trying to instil. The project team were quick to recognise and address these issues. Determined that nobody would be left behind, they spent time with each individual pupil, working with them to identify their particular issues and barriers, and also their interests, looking for the hook that would help them engage. Bespoke provision was then

created based on their needs, including individual mentoring, career mentoring and pastoral support.

Alongside the challenges, there were also clear indicators of success from early on in the project. Eight of the boys in the first cohort became prefects showing a significant increase in their engagement with school. Furthermore, attendance for the group was very good with three quarters of them having attendance of 97% or above. The attendance of the three boys whose engagement was not as strong was below the target at 94% but it was still an improvement on previous years for those particular pupils.

The Unlocking Gifts project has proved to be life changing for our first cohort. The investment we received through the Church of England gave us the opportunity to invest in the future of young men in our school. Our school ethos is based around the biblical concept of 'letting your light shine' and this project enabled our students to realise that they are worthwhile young people who can make a positive difference to others.

(Miss Clare, Deputy Headteacher)

The most successful part of the project was the careers guidance. The boys developed a strong relationship with the careers team through additional meetings and opportunities to visit local colleges. All the boys in the first cohort gained apprenticeships or college places for their post-16 provision. Five of the group also raised their career aspirations to professional qualification level. One boy commented:

I feel more confident and I believe I can be more successful in the future thanks to the support that I have been given.

(Pupil)

Lowton have learnt from the success of this part of the project and, looking forward, they plan to link chaplaincy and careers provision to develop a unified approach.

The school also progressed towards their aim of improved connections with the local church. The chaplaincy role was shared between the school and church creating effective links between the two and the local vicar took a key role in the strategic elements of the project. Church team workers were also involved in leading sessions, further enabling an effective relationship between church and school.

What next?

At the end of the funded period, the project was continuing with the year 9 cohort who met with the chaplain in form time once a week. This group was also showing progress, developing their team working and communication skills and they were ready to train to be mentors to the next cohort. Based on his learning from the external mentoring trainer and

the needs of the boys, the chaplain developed his own peer mentoring training package, making the project sustainable into the future.

Whilst some of the provision, resourced by the Unlocking Gifts grant, that the first cohort experienced will not be possible in future, this initial investment allowed Lowton to think creatively about how they can improve the lives of their young people. Through the two



years of the funded project they have been able to try different approaches, learn from the external providers and create their own sustainable package 'in house' on a smaller budget.