

## **GTC Report**

I applied for a GTC Bursary to explore the concept of peer support in secondary schools and specifically to assess the suitability of it in the school where I teach, namely Lurgan College. The Bursary allowed me to visit other schools, meeting with teachers who administer the scheme as they reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of their particular scheme. I was also able to invite Cordula Bellin, the outreach worker with Childline, into our school. Cordula ran a staff awareness and information session on peer support and peer mentoring.

As Head of Year 11, I am increasingly aware of a number of pupils within my year group who appear not to 'fit in' and who seem to be socially on the periphery. As a Year Head I would try to meet these pupils in an effort to understand their problems and to possibly have an informal chat with others in the year group who might be sympathetic towards them. When these avenues have been explored I wondered if there was another approach which might help these isolated pupils. Through an outside organisation, I was aware of the idea of peer support or peer mentoring, and also aware that it was running in other schools.

Peer support involves an older pupil, who has had some training in the area, becoming a 'mentor' to a younger pupil. The 'mentor' and 'mentee' can then meet as often as is mutually suitable with the aim of the older pupil supporting and nurturing the younger pupil through any problems they might face in the school situation. With a peer support scheme in operation, as a Year Head, I would have proximity to sixth form pupils who would have had some training in the area of peer support. If and when problems arise in my year group, I would be able to match a mentee with a suitable mentor and then facilitate meetings between them. These mentors would act as a 'go-between', someone for the mentee to talk to who has recently been through similar experiences to the mentee, and yet not a member of staff, who by the very nature of teacher-pupil relationships, would be both older and most likely more distant than another pupil.

There are obvious advantages for both the mentor and the mentee. The mentee has an older pupil to confide in, and an older pupil who can empathise and discuss ways round the problems faced by the mentee. The mentor has the advantage of the training for the role, training which would cover listening skills and the concepts of confidentiality and boundaries. In addition to this, they should benefit from the level of responsibility assigned to them.

If we decide to introduce a peer mentoring scheme in Lurgan College then this scheme should be reviewed annually by means of a questionnaire for both mentors and mentees. There should be on-going support for mentors through the Year Heads, which would have an element of inherent evaluation encompassed within it.

After I visited the schools that have peer support schemes in operation, I met with interested members of our pastoral care team and disseminated what I

felt were the pertinent points of the schemes that I had picked up during the time spent with the other teachers. Furthermore, some members of the pastoral care team attended the staff awareness session that Cordula ran.

I was privy to some of the confidential information collected in one particular school and while I am aware that peer support is not the answer to all problems in schools of a pastoral nature, there was sufficient evidence to believe that supportive relationships had developed as a result of peer support, and that some of the young people involved had increased self-esteem as a result of the scheme.

It was a privilege to visit other schools and hear a little of what goes on in other establishments in regard to peer support and to have some insight to the good work which Childline is doing in this area. This Bursary has afforded me the opportunity to explore peer support in a variety of contexts, and having done so, I believe that there is much value in it and I now feel much better equipped to be involved in such a scheme.