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Helping young people be their personal best

Case Study

How recognition of prior learning and growth mindset can build relationships and increase wellbeing



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Introduction

A group of advisors from the teaching and community learning and development (CLD) professions used the SCQF Partnership's Recognition of Prior Learning toolkit 'My Skills My Future' (MSMF) combined with growth mindset concepts to mentor disengaged first year pupils on a one-to-one basis. Training centred on the use of the toolkit and how to deliver encouragement, recognition and praise using growth mindset language and attitudes. Advisors and young people enjoyed using MSMF, and attributed its use to improved relationships with the young people. Increases in confidence, career and skills awareness and ambition were other benefits of the mentoring.

Key findings

- Using growth mindset language while using the MSMF toolkit with disengaged young people had a positive effect;
- Advisors reflected that the building of positive relationships was a key reason for this;
- The process was thought to be an effective way to develop the mindset of the young people with respect to both behaviour and development of skills;
- Improvements were observed in confidence, career and skills awareness, motivation, ambition and resilience;
- The toolkit represents a relevant and up to date solution for supporting the development of a growth mindset in disengaged young people;
- With appropriate training in growth mindset, it is possible for advisors to model and support growth mindset attitudes and language.

Background

Growth mindset

Carol Dweck describes two mindsets: growth mindset and fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that ability is pre-determined and fixed, while people with a growth mindset believe that ability can be developed given perseverance, reflection, support and high expectations from all. Praise can be powerful, but research has shown that indiscriminate praise does not improve self-esteem and can in fact be damaging. Raising self-esteem through recognition and development of skills is more effective. Delivering that praise using 'growth mindset' language is essential if the praise is to have a positive effect. For example telling a young person who has shown skill in building and fixing bicycles that they are naturally good at it is less effective, and potentially more damaging, than recognising the many hours they have spent honing that skill. Acknowledging the journey that the young person has made, highlighting the times they have overcome struggle to achieve, and praising the development process that led to the high skill level are all important. This encourages the young person to see the relationship between struggle, perseverance and eventual success, rather than attributing the success to a genetic fluke.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) exists in two forms: summative RPL, where learning credit is given for previous learning or work experience to allow students to start college or university courses at a point later than the beginning; and formative RPL, where participants have their prior learning, skills or wider achievements recognised in a non-formal way, with the intention of improving 'softer' outcomes such as self-esteem or resilience. The MSMF toolkit is a formative RPL toolkit.

My Skills My Future

This toolkit was originally developed by the SCQF Partnership¹, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Glasgow Caledonian University Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (GCU LEAD) to recognise the wider achievements obtained outside school or college for young people at risk of a negative post school destination. The toolkit was piloted in 2012 for use with looked after young people, and was found to increase their self-esteem, skill-and-self-awareness, resilience, motivation and ambition (Hennessy and Connelly, 2012).

All advisors must receive training before using the toolkit. They are advised to complete three sessions with a young person; although, there is flexibility in the number of sessions, depending on available time and young person requirements and engagement. The MSMF toolkit is a colourful tactile folder which contains a number of sections to be worked through in order. The first section contains a series of 'my experience' cards, which detail a range of activities that young people may have engaged in, for example caring for others or going to concerts. The front of the cards names the activities and shows a collection of modern

¹ <http://scqf.org.uk/>

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photographs and images depicting the activity. On the back of the cards, the skills associated with the activities are given; the skills are accompanied by symbols which represent different skill areas recognised by the SCQF (Figure 1).

The advisor works with the young person to identify which skills they have from the list. They calculate how many of each symbol they have and therefore learn their 'skill personality'. The main purpose of this section is to create a relaxed atmosphere and to set the scene for the more intensive sections ahead. The following sections involve focusing in on one activity and working together to benchmark skills with the SCQF, then developing personal statements and sentences which could be used in job or college applications.

The aim of the resource is to raise confidence and self-esteem and to re-engage young people by helping them understand the level of their learning so they can make a plan of action for the future.



























If you have ever been a carer or looked after a friend or relative, you may have some of these skills and abilities.		
Caring for Others		
SCQF	Description:	✓ Tick all that are true for you
 	I talk to the person I'm looking after and find out what kind of help he or she needs and wants	
 	I find out about their likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests to ensure that we have interesting things to talk about when we're together	
 	I try to learn about any illnesses or disabilities they have and how best to help them (either by talking to them or by researching on the internet or in medical books)	
 	I think of ideas for how to spend time with them, keeping in mind their routines and any possible limits (e.g. physical or mental conditions)	
 	I am aware of health and safety issues and follow guidelines to stay safe and well	
 	I am aware of potential problems that could develop, and make sure that I have emergency contact numbers in case I need help	
 	I try always to be patient and take my time with people who have physical, mental or emotional problems	
 	I take responsibility for the physical part of their care, including things like helping them with bathing, hair, skin and dental care	
 	I help them with medications, making sure that medicines are organised so they take the correct doses at the right time of day	
	I respect their customs, beliefs and traditions, even if they are very different from my own	
 	I pay attention to changes in mood or emotions. I am sensitive to their feelings and try to make things as nice as I can for them	
Symbol:	What it means:	How many of these?
	Knowledge and Understanding (Knowing a lot about a particular subject, such as how a car engine works or how to look after small children)	
	Practical Skills (Hands-on stuff, like the ability to design and make a table, or draw a picture or repair a broken bicycle)	
	Thinking Skills (Figuring things out, solving puzzles, sizing up situations, solving problems)	
	Communication, Numeracy and IT Skills (Listening, talking, writing, working with numbers and using computers and gadgets)	
	Being Responsible and Working with Others (Planning things, getting things done, working on your own or with others, making sure that work is finished and is of good standard)	

Figure 1: the back of a 'my experience' card

Methodology

Six advisors received training in use of the MSMF toolkit and in growth mindset, particularly on how to give praise and encouragement to young people in a way that will foster a growth mindset. They were asked to complete three sessions with a young person of their choice and to complete a questionnaire before they started and after they had completed the three sessions. The questionnaire included questions on how well they knew the young person, how motivated, confident and aware of career opportunities they were. Advisors were asked to use a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 indicates 'not at all' and 10 indicates 'very'. They were also asked to come together after six weeks to share their experiences in a focus group.

Findings

Four out of the six advisors attended the focus group and completed the questionnaire before and after their sessions with the young people. Their feedback is given here.

Questionnaire data

The questions asked and responses given are shown in Table 1. Advisors usually reported an improvement in each of the outcomes. The average scores showed an improvement in all outcomes, with the greatest improvements in skills awareness, awareness of career possibilities and ambition.

Table 1

	Advisor 1		Advisor 2		Advisor 3		Advisor 4		Average score	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
How well do you know they young person?	5	6	6	7	5	8	6	7	5.5	7
How aware are they of their skills?	3	3	7	7	2	7	7	8	4.75	6.25
How self-confident are they?	1	2	1	3	3	7	7	7	3	4.75
How engaged are they in school?	2	1	1	4	2	5	4	3	2.25	3.25
How aware of possible careers are they?	3	7	2	6	1	9	5	5	2.75	6.75
How ambitious are they?	2	5	2	3	2	7	5	5	2.75	5
How motivated are they to do well?	2	2	3	5	2	4	5	4	3	3.75
How resilient are they?	1	1	5	5	2	4	6	7	3.5	4.25

The differences in scores given before and after the MSMF sessions were used to inform and guide a discussion group. This gave the advisors the opportunity to reflect and add context and evidence to support the scores they had given.

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Focus group discussion

Advisors felt that the toolkit's main strength was in relationship building. Key relationships are known to be a protective factor for vulnerable young people (Stein and Dixon, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2017), so this observation is significant. According to one advisor:

"I thought the toolkit was particularly useful for building relationships. Just getting to know the young ... just made the whole process that bit easier, and because (certainly I found) you're giving them a receptive ear and you're talking things through with them, they're a wee bit more willing to take advice from you on board."

Another observed that the positive relationship had an impact on the engagement and wider school life of the young person they worked with:

"Now he's back in the main stream class and he's doing alright, and because of his relationship with me, when there have been any sort of issues, we've been able to diffuse it quite quickly. So it's been really positive in that sense."

According to the advisors, self-confidence increased for some of the young people.

"His confidence is beginning to grow and I think there's probably a variety of positive things going on with him."

The toolkit was seen to be helpful in articulating career choices; something which was thought to be difficult previously:

"It is a tool that young people seem to engage with; it seems to be very friendly for them, and even just flicking through the activities, you could quickly identify what they like, what they want to do. Whereas if you're speaking to somebody about being a chef or whatever, they don't have that; you can't really put that word to what it actually means, and I think that was a huge benefit. Kind of saw the bigger picture of what they could be doing."

One advisor observed an increase in ambition following on from the identification of career options:

"When you actually look at the individual criteria he's made a lot of progress. Every single one of them is positive. Some of them are quite dramatic in terms of possible careers. Previously I reckon he wasn't interested in future progression at all and now we've got him as up to a 9; he's got ambitions, he's got things that he wants to do and he's starting to believe a bit more in his ability to actually get there."

Due to the frequency and format of the sessions, the process was seen as a good tool to support development of a growth mindset in the young person, both from a behaviour point of view:

"Yeah, I mean what I found when I was speaking to him from week to week is that very often we would just talk about what's happening in school at the moment. We'd talk about various different behavioural issues that he was getting himself involved with, and by virtue of doing it we were able

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to talk about how could you have reacted in a different way to try and tackle this behaviour from a growth mindset point of view?"

And from the recognition of and development of skills:

"What was particularly important for discussions that I had with [name] was the section on computer games, and he's computer game daft, so just as an 'in' that was great. When you start talking about computer games and growth mindset and all the skills that are associated with them, all of a sudden that's very, very relevant to his life and his interests and what he wants to do. So from a starting point it's perfect."

Conclusion

Questionnaire data and focus group discussions with advisors revealed that using growth mindset language while using the MSMF toolkit with vulnerable young people had a positive effect on the young people. Relationship building was seen to be the main benefit of using the toolkit in this way. The process was thought to be an effective way to develop the growth mindset of the young people with respect to both behaviour and development of skills. Improvements were observed in confidence, career and skills awareness, motivation, ambition and resilience.

Building a growth mindset in vulnerable young people has the potential to greatly increase their wellbeing. A move away from low self-beliefs and expectations and a move towards career aspirations are clearly of huge benefit to young people at high risk of negative destinations. The MSMF toolkit represents a relevant and up to date solution for supporting the development of a growth mindset in disengaged young people through its focus on relationship building and skill recognition. With appropriate training in growth mindset, advisors will be enabled to model and support growth mindset attitudes and language.

References

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Stein, M., Dixon, J. (2006): *Young people leaving care in Scotland*, European Journal of Social Work, 9:4, 407-423

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For more information on the benefits of using the My Skills, My Future pack with various user groups, get in touch with the SCQF Partnership on 0845 270 7371 or at info@scqf.org.uk. Free MSMF workshops run regularly throughout the year – consult the website at <http://scqf.org.uk/events/> for details and to book your place.