

SISTERS

SISTERS took life slowly. I was working as a Careers Adviser in The Ramsgate School – an LEA high school situated across the road from the large sprawling Newington Council Estate located outside the town of Ramsgate in one of the most deprived wards in Kent.

The statistics of high unemployment, extreme poverty, teenage pregnancy, drugs and alcohol related crime, breakdown in family units which required social services intervention, sexually transmitted diseases, suicide rates etc. etc. were exceptionally high when compared to county and national levels.

The combined effects of these factors was to produce a growing number of young people who were social excluded by their environment, surroundings and local influences and who increasingly and most worryingly 'chose' to exclude themselves from any opportunities that would mean they had to step out of their 'comfort zone' and risk alienation from their peers and family. The lack of motivation and interest was becoming very set and I was becoming increasingly aware of how completely irrelevant the traditional careers guidance I had to offer was. This was confirmed by my dismal failure to engage the students' interest in any classroom careers groups.

A considerable number of the students I worked with were in foster care or residential children's homes or lived in very troubled family homes where support, guidance and interest was not often available in the middle of a daily battle for survival. The school itself was the only one of nine secondary schools in the area with spare places. This meant that every young person between the age of 11 and 16 who needed a school place was given one in The Ramsgate School. This included students in care from inside and outside of the county, refugee and asylum seeker young people and excluded students from other schools. It was also seen as the 'last resort' school for Year 6 students finishing their primary education locally.

The following is a list of the SISTERS feelings about their school and is taken from the Design Brief they put together for Casson Mann International Exhibition Designers who worked with the girls to enhance my Emotional Learning Area in school known as The Power House.

It's a noisy and often violent environment
Its always either too hot or too cold
We get very wet and muddy going from class to class
The toilets smell awful (when they are open and not trashed)
We get thirsty
We have no proper year areas
We get very tired
We get back ache sitting on the uncomfortable chairs for hours
Things get broken and stolen
There is no colour or music
We don't have enough books or equipment

We find lessons boring and this makes it hard to learn
It's our home for six hours every day
It's the only chance we get to see our friends
We have our only hot meal at lunchtimes
For some of us it's the only security we have
We think that some of the teachers care about us

They went on to say that all those things made them feel so emotional sometimes that they didn't know what to do. We did a lot of work together about emotional states and the list of emotions they felt about being in school which included feeling rejected, Lonely, Frightened, Miserable, Shocked, Sad, Unloved, Angry.

I noticed that the girls' career aspirations in particular were very closely linked to their self image (this included how they perceived themselves, and how their peers and family perceived them and their female 'role'). And the value they placed on that image and role i.e. their level of self esteem. The comment below is just one example of this thinking:

“Thank you for helping my daughter with careers advice. What you don't seem to understand is that you might be able to take the girl out of the estate but you can't take the estate out of the girl. I don't want to set her up for failure and rejection. She is better staying with her own kind.”

Quote from Mum of Year 9 student at Careers Options Evening

I felt like a helpless bystander as I watched over a space of time how the girls' perceptions of themselves and their levels of self esteem spiralled downwards. For some this resulted in a terrible state of 'resignation' that even became noticeable in their body language, facial expressions and breathing. They walked slowly, talked slowly, had no physical or mental energy and were always tired - as though the stuffing had been knocked out of them and they were left with a sense of complete emptiness and hopelessness. Others went on full attack mechanism and became the 'in your face' loud, aggressive leaders or loners with a physical or verbal retort for anything or person they perceived to be a threat. These emotional states caused many of them to travel down paths that were fast becoming almost predetermined and inevitable in their eyes and the eyes of those around them.

I myself was suffering for them and with them and although inside the classroom things were not going well, outside and after school I had been building strong relationships with a small group of the girls in Year 9. We met regularly and spent hours putting the world to rights and daydreaming about having different lives. When they visualised their dream futures it made me come home and cry because what they wanted is what I had always taken for granted that I could and would have in life. This is what one girl wrote for me:

“ In my dream life, I would eat healthy food and fresh fruit and the cooker would be mended and I would be slim and not fat. The washing machine

would be mended and I would wear clean clothes every day have soft towels and nice smelly stuff in the bathroom. My dad would have a job and my mum would not get depressed and drink too much. My brother would not get in trouble and would not hit me and I would go to college and study to be a nurse like Sonya in Eastenders. We would go down town on Saturdays as a family and all have ice creams on the seafront.”

I felt strongly that for the girls to be able to look realistically at career options or indeed any future life choices, they needed to be provided with access to a whole host of opportunities and activities which would allow them to explore and challenge, where appropriate, their own self image and perception of what they felt they were capable of achieving and more importantly – what they had a **right** to expect from others.

I wanted to provide them with a safe and welcoming environment which offered unconditional friendship, engaging activities, opportunities to learn new skills, chances to meet new people and experience the ‘feel good’ factor and ‘flow’ which is the very foundation of building a long term intrinsic motivation for life and learning.

It was around this time that I read the following words:

“A woman’s judgement of ‘self’ influences the kinds of friends she chooses, how she gets along with others, the kind of person she has relationships with, and how productive she will be. It affects her creativity, integrity and stability.

Her feelings of self-worth form the core of her personality and determines the use she makes of her aptitude and ability. Her attitude towards herself has a direct bearing on how she lives all parts of her life.”

Reading this was my decisive moment and seemed to put ‘in a nutshell’ all the reasons why the SISTERS programme should be developed.

I knew from the outset that to run the SISTERS programme for the first year in the way I wanted to would be expensive. It would include buying resources, equipment and materials that could be re used and therefore help the programme be sustainable over a longer period of time.

I had learnt from developing other programmes that money was more forthcoming if a successful pilot had been tried first.

So, in April, 2000, with a small amount of money from some SRB slippage funds) I wrote and delivered a basic six week programme for ten Year 9 girls in school.

The ten girls were mixed and included girls who would not normally associate with each other and had different levels of personal and social skills and academic ability.

I asked my after school group to help me devise the programme and they came up with a motto – “Looking good on the outside, Feeling good on the inside” at this point there was no way they would get involved in the pilot, but they were more than willing to help develop the programme.

They also suggested the content for six basic sessions which included sessions on team building and working together, healthy lifestyle (physical and emotional), understanding your body, hair and beauty, communicating effectively (including body language and facial expressions), being creative.

They wanted each session to include dance and exercise to music and opportunities in the programme to try out drama, music, singing, filming making, art and drama activities.

I wanted them to have lots of healthy snacks and drinks to eat in each session and high quality materials and resources to use.

I wanted them to work with professionals to enhance the value and standard of each session and I also called on a whole host of friends, colleagues and positive female adults to join the girls in each session and get involved. These visitors would provide the girls with interested positive female role models and also let them see how diverse and interesting women can be from all walks of life.

We took masses of photos (later on we were given a digital camcorder and made a wonderful showcase of activities over two years and each SISTER had a copy to take home plus photos as well.

The local youth and community female arts worker helped out with the singing and dancing etc. and the pilot was very successful with positive evaluations coming back from the girls and the female visitors.

I had already made contact with the Regional Manager of Scottish Power Learning (now Southern Water) and he agreed to come and meet the pilot group girls, look at the photos etc. and the outcome of his visit was his agreement to give us the full funding we would need to run our dream programme for one year for all the girls in Year 9

We ran the first Year 9 programme one every half a term (six times over the year) one two hour session after school every week for six weeks in a row for a group of ten – twelve girls at a time.

During the first year all but one girl in Year 9 joined the programme and the attendance was quite astounding – to the point were we had very sick girls who had been off school turning up to join in at 3.30pm.

The programme was further developed for Year 10 and the SISTERS decided they wanted things to run differently. By this time they were organising things very much themselves and in Year 10 we had programmes for Singing SISTERS, Dancing SISTERS, Drama Queen SISTERS, Junk Band SISTERS, Film making SISTERS, DJ Mixing SISTERS, and all of them came together at

the end of the Year for an Arts week of activities at Channel Theatre Studios in Margate.

SISTERS was very successful and the difference in the girls in some cases was quite amazing. Their awareness of themselves and other people, their ability to understand their own feelings and those of others coupled with their new and improved communication skills made them much more able to empathise, form and keep healthy relationships and friendships. They learnt new skills, visited new places and experienced the feel good factor and a state of 'flow' in certain learning situations which made them hungry for more of the same good feelings.

They seemed to blossom into young women and became incredibly supportive of each other in the process.

There is now interest from abroad and I will be talking about the SISTERS project at the NEXUS EQ Conference in Orlando on January 15th this year.

TAKE UP IN OTHER SCHOOLS

There are a number female staff from other schools who visited the programme when it ran at The Ramsgate School. They were inspired to go away and run their own and to my knowledge there are seven schools in Kent actively running SISTERS programmes all following the original process and programme I put together in the form of a facilitators pack. Also a Prince of Wales All Female Volunteer Scheme uses the programme.

The basic programme also forms part of one of the twelve areas of action of the Kent County Council Public Service Agreement.

The girls were visited by Barbara James from the central Department of Health who is carrying out a survey into innovative intervention programmes .

I will be visiting the states and talking about the programme at the NEXUS EQ conference in Orlando Florida, organised by the Six Seconds Organisation .

TO SUM UP

The content of the sessions was pretty standard. Emotional and Sexual Health, Relationships, Exercise, Communication; Appearance, Team Building etc. etc. What was different and most effective was the process.

When I asked the girls to tell me what was important in the success of the programme, most of their answers were to do with the process rather than the content

The nice way they were always spoken to

The way everything was offered as a choice

The no pressure approach

The personal invitations

The non judgemental attitude

The high quality materials which made them feel special

The way the sessions were chopped up into small flexible chunks

The way their ideas and evaluation ideas were quickly put into practice
The way they were treated so well – ‘as equals’ “like stars”
The way people really listened to them
The huge feeling of ‘safety’ in the group
The fact there was a membership card and full programme given in advance
The record with the photos and video showcase

Quotes from visitors

Thank you for what was for me a really important visit. I was profoundly impressed by what I regard as the best practice that I have seen in this area. I will be quite honest and say that I have been to various courses before on Emotional Intelligence - usually delivered by educational psychologists and have found them to be very good times to catch up on my sleep. However if Emotional Intelligence means what you were doing with your SISTERS girls, than I am a convert to it. Whilst sex education was only a minor part of the whole programme, there was no doubt that when it was delivered it was delivered with maximum impact because of all the adjoining work that had been done on raising these young women’s self esteem and confidence. They would have gained so much more, in terms of their communication skills and their future careers prospects from their participation in the SISTERS Club

John Mulrenan, Head teacher, Christ Church High School, Ashford, Kent.

Thank you for allowing us to visit you in The Ramsgate School. The SISTERS project you have created and are delivering is superb. The environment you have created in your Power House area is conducive to helping you pupils feel relaxed and special. The course you have developed will enable the pupils to feel empowered. This is exactly the way forward for many pupils who are not succeeding in some areas of their life. The way you course is structured working across the different agencies is the way we should all be working to benefit the clients in our care. I have written my thoughts from the visit to share with other colleagues and I know they will want to contact you and come and see for themselves.

Julie Beavers National Healthy Schools Specialist Nurse

Thank you and the SISTERS for allowing me to visit and spend an all too short time watching and listening to the young women from the SISTERS project last Friday. I was very impressed with what I saw and I know from other things I have heard what a great boost to self-esteem the SISTERS project is making.

Mike Pitt, Chief Executive, Kent County Council, Maidstone

FURTHER UPDATES!

Last year I put together a two day facilitators course which included a day looking at emotional literacy theory and practice and a day focusing on facilitators skills for the SISTERS programme. Six local

schools got involved in the training and they are all now running SISTERS Clubs.

Last month, the local council asked me to run something similar for youth workers and other agency professionals. 17 local youth organisations attended and ten are just about to start up SISTERS (and a BROTHERS Club at last!). I am thrilled the basic programme plus the emotionally literate 'process' is moving out and being adapted to suit more informal education places.

Annie Hamlaoui Sept 2007