The reviews in this issue focus on two practical books for teachers, as well as on two policy reports to continue our expansion of focus onto reports in the reviews section. Both books, on the Kidscope peer mentoring approach and on listening approaches for teachers in a busy school context, advocate user-friendly approaches centred on the importance of interpersonal relations and communication in school settings. The holistic development of children is a pervasive concern of both. The policy reports are both based on examples across a range of European city and project contexts, through an EU funded PREVENT project on parental involvement for early school leaving and a European Commission, Directorate General Education and Culture focus on lessons from alternative education for mainstream school settings. The PREVENT project report seeks bridges between education and health contexts to combine a joint strategy for parental involvement and family support. The Ecory's report sets out an agenda for reform of mainstream school settings based on learnings from alternative education. Both reports focus on structures and processes at system levels to give supports and voices to the marginalised to help ensure the education system also works for them.

Paul Downes
Reviews Editor
1. Reflections on the KidsKope: Peer Mentoring programme

Author: Nina Wroe & Penny McFarlane
Publisher: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
Year of Publication: 2014
ISBN: 978-1-84905-500-0

School has become the place were all mankind’s problems should be solved. At the same time headmasters are trying to protect the time for teaching and the staff from getting involved in too much different kind of topics. At the same time it’s more and more obvious that children’s wellbeing and behaviour are influencing their ability to learn in an optimal way. So trying to make every child reach their highest individual intellectual level must also take time to help the children in a more holistic way. Creating a safe and warm climate in the classroom/school, practise social interaction and strengthen a kind of emotional quality is very closely linked to challenging the intellectual growth. But how to do it in the most efficient and pleasurable way?

From my own experience the headmaster has to make the whole school motivated to make ‘the move’. The staff and the parents are important companions to be able to reach the children. An easy model is needed that is proven with some kind of evidence but still leaves some parts for flexibility and that is not so complicated and expensive so you have to be certificated to perform it. If the programme involves several pupils and teachers at the same time, in a reasonable length of time, it starts to be interesting. To get ‘a long life’ and be included as routine in the school it should strengthen the school identity. To me KidsKope has a chance to fulfil these needs. The only part I miss is how the work is presented to the parents. To me it is very important to have the parents’ acceptance and support to deal with their children’s way of talking about serious matters and difficulties in life. I’m sure parents are happy to have other adults helping them to talk to the children about difficult subjects. How that is done is not described in the book and could easily be forgotten or neglected when you are eager to help children in need or at risk. The book just offers an example of ‘parental permission letter’ which to me is not enough. How could parents know what ‘an art and drama work-shop’ is. The same stands for head mentors. Being parent to a mentor, I myself would like to know a little bit more about what KidsKope means.

Personally I have not any experience working with older pupils as mentors to younger in a structured and organised way in a school. But I am fond of the idea if the staff get enough time to plan the work and feel comfortable with it. Adults have to use responsive tutoring and make clear that they take responsibility for any kind of difficult situations. The mentors are “helpers” but could never be left alone with complicated matters. To use older pupils to be mentors for younger is a win-win situation because it helps the mentors to feel important and helpful while the younger get role models in the neighbourhood to look up to.

The book KidsKope is easy to read and mixes the theories behind the practical work. The activities are easy to understand and describe aims, requirements, potential problems and solutions, as well as advice to...
mentees. Time being used for every activity and work-shop seems to be a moderate time for young people to keep concentrated. There is very little that could happen to spoil the plan. Good examples of information materials are also presented. The book makes the threshold low to get started.

My reflections are being made for using KidsKope in school as a way of helping all children to cope with difficult situations or matters of conflicts. I like the idea of general prevention for a bigger population were no one feels pointed out. My impression is that KidsKope could be used in that way. Selecting children “in need”, may be done at a later stage as they understand and seek for more support or help.

Ms. Eva-Britt Leander
Spånga - Tensta, Stockholm

2. Essential Listening Skills for Busy School Staff: What to Say When You Don’t Know What to Say

Author: Nick Luxmoore
Publisher: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
Year of Publication: 2014

The title of this little book of less than 100 pages is attractive to teachers and other school staff as it acknowledges the busyness of their roles. We know that schools are about more than the academic and cognitive development of students but it’s not always easy. This booklet offers very useful suggestions for all staff in busy schools tasked with the holistic development of their students including their social and emotional development. The book is based on the premise that a school’s climate is enormously influenced by the quality of relationships between people and that effective listening is the key to good relationships.

The book aims to support school staffs in becoming more confident and effective in their daily work of listening – to students, to parents, and to colleagues. The idea is that when people feel they are not heard they act out their feelings in order to be heard, whether adults or children, and that feeling understood is what most powerfully precipitates change in human beings.

No time! Schools are busy places but listening can still happen, by using simple strategies such as putting boundaries around times to listen, acknowledging a person’s need to be listened to, scheduling a time for a conversation, not offering advice unless requested, but mostly by being confident in listening. According to the author, listening is about understanding how someone else is feeling. Feelings often get in the way of thinking or learning, therefore, spending time listening can enable learning and teaching. Listening is not about solving other people’s problems or fixing things for other people.

The book outlines the techniques of how to listen, how to acknowledge someone’s need to talk, how to defer a conversation with respect, how to show understanding, how to develop understanding, and how to
empathize. Saying nothing when we don’t know what to say is difficult! We often feel like jumping in with solutions. The book touches on the complexity of relationships, such as projection or transference of feelings, lack of ability or unwillingness to talk, and how to handle confidentiality.

What the book helps with is interpreting what people might be looking for when they approach someone to talk to or to look for advice. The skills of listening, particularly in a busy context need practice.

The book gives advice on listening to people who are struggling with family relationships, who need to talk about death, who are stubborn, who talk of suicide, who lack self-esteem, who are angry, who are being bullied, who say they’re depressed, who self-harm, who want to talk about sex, who can’t see the point of life, who don’t care about anything.

The book talks about conversations that can’t be avoided. For example, when a student does something wrong and needs to be spoken to, how to manage this situation by responding to the immediate problem while also seeking to understand underlying issues. The art of listening is about listening for what’s not being said as much as for what is being said, something that may be particularly important in talking to parents about their children’s progress or in talking to students or colleagues who may have other issues going on in their lives.

A key message of the book is that listening is such an important part of school life. A second key message is that there are no shortcuts. It can be tempting to prescribe quick solutions, and while there may be times when this is necessary, listening is essential to feeling understood which in turns helps change human behavior. It is the quality of listening rather than the quantity.

The book concludes with a checklist of the key points discussed in the book – very useful for the busy staff of a school. The checklist doesn’t replace the need to read the book, because the book provides the context for the checklist, but is a useful summary of the key messages of the book. Listening is not easy, and the book does not pretend it is, but the author offers strategies for school staff to listen more effectively when trying to deal with issues that arise on a daily basis in busy schools.

The book is simply written. It is not an academic book with lots of references to support the arguments or positions outlined in the book. The only evidence offered by the author is his own experience of working for over 35 years as a teacher, youth worker, project leader and counsellor in schools. It’s a useful resource for all school staff who deal with people as part of their daily lives.

Ms. Deirbhile Nic Craith
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), Dublin
The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? What are you doing? Think about these once in a while and watch your answers change.

Richard Bach

We increasingly understand that in the modern world, developed by Smart Technology and Innovation, schools and teachers themselves are not enough for children to be educated in a modern way, while parents build their careers and spend more and more time at their jobs. Our main task is to help the child feel valued and believe in your abilities and thus to support him/her in his/her path to growth as an autonomous and successful person.

Increasingly we realize that depriving the parent of an active role in the upbringing of their own children, creates a gap between school and family. There is a mismatch between school and real life in the sense that the school still focuses on the accumulation of knowledge, which remains largely outside the context that makes them understandable for students and applicable in daily life.

And we are increasingly convinced that in order to overcome this fragmentation between home and school, parents and teachers need to work together to exchange information, ideas, opinions, and to take along important decisions concerning the overall education and emotional children's development.

In response to this existing "gap", this report presents an innovative holistic approach and addresses issues from the real lives of students by giving possible alternatives to prevent early school leaving by involving parents. The document aims to inform and guide the strategic planning of parental involvement in education for dropout school prevention for local authorities and schools around Europe. The text is developed on the specific experiences, discussions and political recommendations from 10 URBACT city municipalities, involved in the implementation of PREVENT project (http://urbact.eu/prevent), within the context of the key documents and guidelines of the European Union for early school leaving (ESL) and social exclusion. PREVENT proposes an innovative approach where parents are considered as a key element to reduce ESL.

This Policy Recommendation report is valuable not only for interested stakeholders but also for the a wide public because, from one side - it is based on an ongoing dialogue with the 10 city municipalities  

1 The report can be accessed here: http://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/media/policyrecommendationsreport.pdf
involved within PREVENT project and from the other, it is a modern review which investigates international research relevant to recent analysis of EU Commission on ESL and social innovation from the perspective of parental involvement in education. Research for the report is a source from a large range of studies over two decades – and the reference section gives a snapshot of some of the most relevant and recent studies.

The main focus is not only on parental involvement and participation in school life in Europe, supported by questions and discussion of the 10 Local Action Plans, developed within PREVENT projects, but also on building a quality human relationship between us as adults, between adults and children and between the children themselves. Of utmost importance is the recommendation for inclusion and use of more marginalized parents in organizing parent-teachers meetings, parent councils and school boards as traditional forms of parental involvement in the school systems in Europe.

In response to the challenging issues, the Policy recommendation report recommends establishment of support centers as community based “one-stop-shop family centers” with multidisciplinary teams, which focus on child and parental mental health, emotional support and school attendance. It offers an open understanding of system change by focusing on structural indicators to challenge system blockages to educational reform.

Last but not least, the Policy recommendation report shows that the success of public policies for dropout prevention is only possible by attracting wide public support, which requires joint efforts of state institutions, school management, teachers and parents.

But above all it is necessary to change the people's attitudes and awareness of the importance of active parental involvement in education and their children's lives.

Ms. Mariya Goncheva
Sofia Municipality, Bulgaria

4. Preventing Early School Leaving in Europe: Lessons Learned from Second Chance Education

Author: Ecorys
Publisher: European Commission
Year of Publication: 2013

Preventing Early School Leaving in Europe-Lessons Learned from Second Chance Education was commissioned by the European Commission Director General in Education and Culture in 2012. The reduction of early school leaving to 10% is one of the headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy. Attainment of this objective is considered a prerequisite for the fulfilment of numerous other Europe 2020

objectives; particularly those relating to youth employment, educational attainment, long term employment, health, poverty and social exclusion. What makes this report so relevant is that within governmental institutions and across European educational systems, there has been a real shortage of information regarding what makes an effective Second Chance (Compensatory Mechanism) for early school leavers (Dale, 2010). Concurrent with this is the limited understanding of how second chance mechanisms might benefit wider educational systems especially in preventing early school leaving, a major European wide challenge.

What Ecorys have produced in response to this issue is an accessible and easy to use report which details and operationalises what have been long standing challenges for educational providers. With its constant reference to case studies (along with accompanying annex), and desk study findings within thematic contexts, this report systematically deepens the readers understanding in a progressive manner. Identification of the key hallmarks of second chance education, with illustration via the case studies, provides a realistic richness that keeps the reader engaged with clear understandings of how such findings manifest ‘on the ground’. Assessment of the transferability potential of models and approaches into various options, systematically accounts for both the educational context and inherent challenges of mainstream education. The resulting description of the need for a systems approach based on elements interacting and being tailored according to learners being located at the centre of such a system illustrates the need for humanistic approaches. Direction in respect of the levers and processes of change along with detail regarding the challenges inherent and solutions required for transferability continues with the factual and informative approach inherent throughout this report. Questions of context and scale are detailed in respect of the replication and transferability of schemes. Though the study could not identify a hierarchy of successful second chance characteristics, what is clearly evident from this report is the criticality of the emotional health and well-being of young people to the attainment of educational outcomes.

Particularly intriguing is the analysis and overview of motivation and engagement as central axioms within educational discourses directed at reducing or preventing early school leaving. When this relationship is viewed through specific educational processes such as teaching and learning, assessment and progression and planning and organisation it becomes even more engaging. As a practitioner working in an early school leaving setting I can clearly hear the voice of the learner throughout this section. The need for values, linked to clear purpose accompanied by a sense of empowerment is identified as critical and necessary within educational climates, processes, learning relationships and environments. What is evident from the fieldwork and case studies in this report is the primacy of the person, the holistic approach that is required and the emotional journey and trajectories that young people undergo as participants within educational institutions.

For policy makers and practitioners this report provides a roadmap on how to operationalise an educational system that if realised can be called an education and care process complete with concrete outcomes to address current educational and social challenges. The report engages with the challenges of replicating and transferring schemes, detailing various replication options with real world examples. A continuum throughout all chapters is the need to further empower young people and their self-esteem by engaging with them in real dialogue that would also mean further inclusion of young people within decision making processes. This report details at both a policy and practise level how to prevent and respond to early school leaving,
simultaneously acknowledging the limitations that face educational institutions. As a practitioner working with early school leavers it is evident that this report should be essential reading for all teachers, school support staff, educational management, academics and policy makers who are working in this area.

References

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