

**Developing Agency and Leadership in Year 12 Peer Mentor Girls Through the Co-Designing and
Implementation of a Social Media Workshop**

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Abstract

Girls in the 21st Century often aspire to be leaders, and we need to help develop their agency and leadership skills in our education setting, to give them the tools and skills to continue into the future. At Wycombe High School, I recruited our new cohort of 20 peer mentors and met with them for 12 weeks. During this time, we discussed different themes each week to help develop the students' leadership skills as they planned and created a social media workshop to deliver to a Year 7 class. During this process I implemented a mixed-methods approach to collect data including questionnaires, interviews, journals and video recordings, and identified the themes through my analysis. The findings indicate that the peer mentors' confidence increased when co-designing and delivering the social media workshops. The peer mentors had full autonomy and independence over the project, which strengthened their agency. The peer mentors also became more aware of their own social media practices, and the relationship between the different year groups developed, which created a sense of connectedness. The Year 12 students were able to develop a sense of agency, thereby providing them with the opportunity to strengthen their leadership skills. To further advance this study, it would be necessary to create additional opportunities within the school for peer mentors and other student leaders to exercise greater agency in their educational and school-related experiences.

Glossary

Peer mentor: Selected Year 12 students who have attended training by Buckinghamshire MIND, who support with the whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. The peer mentors deliver workshops, one-to-one sessions, assemblies and events to students at Wycombe High School to all year groups to promote positive wellbeing and mental health.

Student agency: When students have the capacity to be involved in purposeful initiatives, seeking meaning, and acting with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives.

Year 7: UK pupils aged 11–12 years old in their first year of secondary school.

Year 12: UK pupils aged 16–17 years old in their penultimate year of secondary school.

Cornell note taking method: Note taking system that assists users to condense and organise notes.

Buckinghamshire MIND: Charity in Buckinghamshire, UK that tackles stigma, barriers, and isolation so that everyone can access mental health support when they need it. The peer mentors were trained by this charity.

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Being able to give leaders a voice in education and opportunity to lead can be a challenging element as leadership roles often rotate around a tutor group or classroom and are short-term. However, a whole school initiative, such as peer mentoring, can provide an opportunity for students to lead for a longer period, providing a range of support to younger students. Within education, students need to develop a sense of purpose, and peer mentoring can be an excellent way to strive toward student success (Collier, 2015). My experience at Wycombe High School highlighted two issues: the impact that social media has on wellbeing and the limited opportunities for peer mentors to cultivate their agency in their leadership role. The focus of my research was to combine the two issues, as I deemed it necessary to investigate this further.

We need students to be actively involved in social problems that affect them directly, as this allows them the opportunity to experience empowerment and develop their own agency and allows them to be a part of necessary change. Cook-Sather (2019) describes the importance of student voice and how this affects students' ability both to exert influence in their own learning and to inform understandings of broader learning contexts. Cook-Sather describes young people as social actors and experts in their own lives when they participate in something that matters to them. Therefore, peer mentors focusing on something that was important to them was an important aspect of this research, as during the discussion stages, it was clear that students wanted to share their knowledge with the younger students. This led me to investigate how the peer mentors' agency and leadership skills were developed when they co-designed their student-led social media workshops via the research question: 'Developing Agency and Leadership in Year 12 Peer Mentor Girls Through the Co-Designing and Implementation of a Social Media Workshop.'

When studying the topic of student agency, there are several opportunities for research and often this leads to change. Action research was, therefore, an ideal methodology technique for

allowing a practical and flexible problem-solving approach to answer the research question (Mertler, 2020).

Literature Review

Peer mentoring programmes in education have been increasing, as more educational establishments are implementing them in their settings and at a time of reduced resources and increasing demands in education, they have become even more important. Mentoring occurs when a senior person provides information, advice, and emotional support to a younger person or student over time (Baroudi & David, 2020). Peer mentors serve as role models and provide encouragement and support for students. Peer mentors can often build a strong relationship with their mentee if they collaborate with them for a longer time. This relationship is essential to the mentees as they will often build trust with their mentor, which can make the mentor a safe person to confide in and disclose personal issues and information (Collier, 2015).

Collier (2015) describes how a mentor can work with the mentee to empower them to see a potential future and how this can be obtained. Peer mentor programmes can promote leadership development, and the establishment of networks at a low cost. Furthermore, peer mentors often have the capacity to fulfil this role around their studies. Collier describes how peer mentors are often motivated, want to give back to their community, and have the desire to support younger students, which is why peer mentoring programmes are often successful. Rodger (2012) explicitly highlights the importance of building the leadership capacity of the next generation, starting with students; therefore, we need to give our students the opportunity to lead within peer mentoring programmes.

Baroudi and David (2020) found that many peer mentoring studies often investigated the positive outcomes of mentoring on mentees rather than on mentors. Their study explores the impact of the peer mentoring role on female mentors' personal development and leadership practices. Baroudi and David found that the peer mentoring experiences offered great personal and

psychosocial support to female mentors, enhanced their wellbeing, and supported them in their future. The benefits of peer mentoring for mentors include: an increase in personal growth, developed sense of responsibility, commitment and independence, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and being more capable of solving their problems and managing their learning (Baroudi & David, 2020; Collier, 2015; Lachter & Ruland, 2018).

Educators are encouraged to implement peer mentoring programmes to encourage young people to be future leaders who can positively contribute to their communities. Collier (2015) found a number of benefits to peer mentoring programmes, such as an improvement in students' social connections and an increase in support from their educational institution. Mentoring is also recognised as a useful tool to engage students and increase the likelihood of student success and increase their confidence (Black & Voelker, 2008; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Mentoring others also advances their interpersonal and communication skills, increases patience and compassion, maturation, creates better time management, develops better leadership, and enhances personal satisfaction and reputation (Collier, 2015; Lachter & Ruland, 2018).

Baroudi and David (2020) describe the history of peer mentoring programmes and note that they were initially created to address the needs of novice and at-risk students. However, now there are a number of different peer mentoring programmes that are used in the education system for several reasons. Within the structure of peer mentoring programmes, there are often no one-size-fits all programme, and education establishments need to find a programme that best fits their needs (Collier, 2015). Lachter and Ruland (2018) discuss different types of mentoring, including the programme used at Boston University, which has an electronic mentoring scheme to support their students. They describe how peer mentoring can be delivered in a variety of ways, such as providing feedback, serving as a role model, providing one-to-one support, group workshops, encouraging reflection through guided discussion, and providing emotional support. Some education establishments offer more targeted group mentoring for students who might have been identified as

requiring support, often with transitioning into the new education establishment (Black & Voelker, 2008). Collier describes two types of mentoring; hierarchical and peer mentoring. Hierarchical mentoring involves individuals from two different social positions and focuses on how mentoring functions are modified in peer relationships. Peer mentoring, on the other hand, describes a relationship where a more experienced student helps a less experienced student and provides advice, support, and shares knowledge to the mentee (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Peer mentoring is an effective way to show how schools can utilise student voice, with Cook-Sather (2019) describing the close link between student voice and student agency, and how students have the power to influence decisions and practices in schools. Berryman et al. (2017) describe how student voice and agency require a shift in mindset and sharing of power, and by listening to young people and following their advice, educators are more likely to promote change.

Student voice can be used to empower other students through peer mentoring to help students navigate social media in positive ways. Tierney (2025) describes social media and technology as moving targets and acknowledges the importance of listening to students and understanding how they are navigating the online world. The Social Institute (2023) identified that teenage girls who are a part of a leadership programme, can positively share their social media experiences with younger students, and their role can be more powerful than educators. Research also suggests that we need to provide a pro-active and multifaceted approach to better safeguard the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people around social media (Adam, 2021; Meade & Meade, 2023). Many stakeholders are responsible for ensuring a safety-first approach is delivered to children and young people and acknowledge that we need to teach our young people how to navigate the online world safely (Meade & Meade, 2023). The Social Institute is a leader in empowering young people to navigate the online world through their unique approach of capturing student voice and providing opportunities for school leaders. By delivering a peer mentor

programme, teenagers' agency is supported through intentional teaching, involving them in the decision-making process and listening to student voice.

Research Context

Wycombe High School is an all-girls' Grammar School located in Buckinghamshire, England. The school was founded in 1901 and has students from Year 7 (11 years old) to Year 13 (18 years old). Wycombe High School is a school that looks beyond; it looks beyond the traditional grammar school, beyond the league tables and exam results, beyond stereotypes and conventions, and beyond a world where futures are fixed.

Each year, we advertise the peer mentor role to the Year 12 cohort and select 20 students to become whole-school peer mentors, who are led by me and the mental health and wellbeing team. The students are then invited to attend a day of training delivered by Buckinghamshire MIND (n.d.), a local mental health charity, to teach them how to become successful peer mentors. The role of the peer mentors is varied; however, they have responsibility to support the whole school approach to wellbeing. The peer mentors deliver whole-school universal interventions and targeted interventions whilst helping to spread positive mental health around the school. The peer mentors deliver assemblies, support at wellbeing events, such as our annual Wellbeing Fair, deliver drop-in sessions for students during the week, and more. Students in any year group can sign up to have a peer mentor and have one-to-one sessions to help support them with low-level issues, such as emotional wellbeing, friendships, family issues, and managing school life. This year, students were provided the opportunity to engage in the action research project as part of their responsibility as peer mentors, and all mentors consented to take part.

Parents/carers were asked to complete an opt-in Microsoft Office 365 form to give permission for their daughter to take part in the action research project and to become a peer mentor. All identities of the mentors were anonymised by ensuring that names were removed and

redacted from video transcripts and focus groups. I was the only person to have access to this information, which was held securely.

The Action

Within my role as Mental Health Lead, I am aware of the effects that social media has on our students and wanted this to be incorporated into my action research project. The peer mentor programme was tailored to the needs of the students, based on their pre-intervention survey responses, discussions, and my extensive understanding of the literature. The social media exercise that was the focus of my action called for students to plan, create, and deliver a wellbeing workshop focusing on social media to 30 Year 7 students at Wycombe High School.

I met with the peer mentors twice a week over a 12-week period and we discussed different themes each week on topics such as leadership, the role that the peer mentor plays in the whole-school approach, how social media affects wellbeing, and we also explored what the students' role was in this action research project. The voices of the peer mentors indicated they wanted to support the Year 7s and teach them things they would have wanted to learn at their age about social media. The peer mentors then worked collaboratively in small groups to create a social media workshop to deliver to the Year 7 students. The peer mentors were given full autonomy on their topics, and they created sessions on cyberbullying, beauty standards, how to stay safe online, the effects of artificial intelligence (AI), recognising filtered and edited photos, and more. The sessions were all very interactive and included challenges, quizzes, and even prizes.

Data Collection

Throughout my research, I implemented a mixed-methods approach to collect data to investigate how student agency can be developed in the Year 12 peer mentor girls through the collaborative development of a social media workshop. Data collection was conducted regularly across twelve weeks through a range of methods:

- Pre- and post- intervention student questionnaires

- Student and teacher journals
- Individual and focus group interviews
- Video recordings
- Photos
- Field notes

I used the triangulation process to gain greater confidence in my findings, as it involves relating multiple sources of data to assist in establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data and to gain differing perspectives (Mertler, 2020). I used triangulation to compare student comments from interviews and questionnaires with behaviours I observed in discussions and video recordings. At the start of my action research, the peer mentor girls completed a pre-intervention questionnaire. This was a helpful starting point to understand where the students' agency was at and what they thought were the challenges and positives of using social media. Likert-scale surveys were used at the beginning of the research with a 5-point scale (Mertler, 2020). This provided a base set of data which was easy to compare with post-intervention data collected. Following each session with the peer mentors, I created field notes on discussions that the students were having and noted observations made during the session. I used the Cornell note-taking method, because it was beneficial to me as it allowed me to take, organise, and summarise my notes, resulting in better overall comprehension. This note-taking method also allowed me to understand material better and was easy to review when I revisited the data to analyse it.

Interviewing the students was an integral part of my action research as it enhanced student agency within itself by allowing students to share their views. Student voice was captured during all parts of my data collection, but predominantly during the student interviews. These were open-ended and semi-structured interviews that took place in small groups. The benefits of conducting the interviews in small groups were that students were more comfortable to share their views with their peers present and students collaborated on ideas.

Students worked in groups each week and they engaged in regular discussions on social media and how this affects wellbeing and student agency. Students regularly created mind maps during their discussions, and these were captured by taking photos of their work. This highlighted key points that students identified during the discussions and were helpful to take so that key points were not missed.

The final data collected were the results of post-intervention questionnaires to identify any development of changes from the pre-intervention questionnaires. This provided the opportunity to compare data and identify how successful student agency was developed during the action research project.

Data Analysis

My data highlighted significant patterns which helped to support the analysis of my research. I analysed the data using Mertler's (2020) technique to organise, describe, and interpret to help make sense of the data and coded my observation notes. This method allowed me to organise and interpret my data thematically and understand my data. Four key themes emerged from my data, based on student and staff feedback across the surveys, class observations, pre- and post-questionnaires and video recordings of the Year 12 peer mentors. These themes were: increase in the peer mentors' confidence, the importance of autonomy and independence for peer mentors, peer mentors became more self-aware of their own practice, and their relationships developed creating a sense of connectedness.

Discussion of Findings

Increased Agency Develops Peer Mentor Confidence

The findings from the post-intervention questionnaires show that all peer mentors felt their confidence skills increased from taking part in this action research project. Delivering the workshops to Year 7 helped the peer mentors feel more confident, as it was a younger year group. Staff member K reported that the peer mentors were confident in standing in front of a whole class, were

smiley, had open body language, and “confidently created a vibrant atmosphere in the true or false activity.”

Baroudi and David (2020) found that peer mentoring programmes promote students' confidence levels and create a strong sense of purpose. Most students in this study felt that their confidence developed when presenting their workshop. In the video recordings, Student C stated, “at school we do not often present a full one-hour presentation, and therefore I really valued this opportunity.” Staff observations stated that the peer mentors delivered their sessions with humour and were personable and approachable.

In the video recordings and post-intervention questionnaires, the peer mentors identified strengths in their public speaking skills when delivering the workshops, as they were confident when interacting with Year 7. This was also evident from the staff observations that the peer mentors were projecting their voices and circulating around the class demonstrating their confidence when interacting with Year 7 students.

The peer mentors had to think on their feet and adapt, depending on the Year 7 responses in the workshops, and this also promoted confidence in the peer mentors. One group also had access to the seating plan and were able to use the students' names, this increased their confidence as the Year 7 students were more engaged when their names were being used. The peer mentor's confidence skills were developed in many ways during the action research project, which increased their own agency.

Autonomy and Independence Strengthen Peer Mentor Agency

The peer mentors were able to choose their own groups for the action research project. The peer mentors responded positively to this and enjoyed the process. Student K said, “choosing our own groups was really important to me as I wouldn't have been able to speak as easily in front of the year 7s had I not been with people that I felt comfortable with.” I also observed that the relationships between the groups developed as they started working collaboratively as a team.

The peer mentors had full autonomy and agency to choose their own social media topic to plan and deliver to the Year 7 students. Most students enjoyed having agency over their own topic; however, this was challenging for some, and Student F stated, "I found doing independent work difficult at first to get started on choosing the focus of our topic, but after overcoming this, it was easy to form our presentation with activities." When I observed the students in their discussion stage, I identified that some students were asking for more direction and felt uncomfortable by the amount of agency they were given. By allowing the students to have full autonomy over their decisions and not give them the answers, helped to develop their own agency. Cook-Sather (2019) emphasises the significant role students play in decision-making within schools. Consequently, providing students with opportunities to engage in leadership responsibilities and decision-making processes, can foster their development and better support them in the future.

The peer mentors strongly indicated in the class discussions and video recordings that they liked having autonomy when deciding on their activities, content and resources, as they could tailor their sessions to their interests. Subsequently, staff observed that the peer mentors were knowledgeable in their topics and familiar with their materials. Giving students the autonomy and independence to make their own decisions within the action research project evidently strengthened student agency.

Workshop Delivery Increases Peer Mentor Self-Awareness of Social Media Practices

One of the key themes that I identified in my data was how the peer mentors' behaviour changed following delivery of the workshops. The peer mentors reported in the video recordings and post-intervention questionnaires that they learnt several different skills, such as confidence, working together and as a team, but they also learnt things about themselves throughout the process and changed their social media habits. Baroudi and David (2020) describe how, when nurturing students' leadership through peer mentoring programmes, often there are positive effects on students' personal growth and self-awareness.

In the post-intervention questionnaires, the peer mentors were asked whether they would benefit from a digital detox and all students said they would consider it or would do this. Student S reported that they had taken a break from social media since completing the action research project and said, “this has made me feel a lot more focused on my schoolwork.” The data showed that 11 students reported using social media less, making them feel more relaxed, managing their time better, being more productive and having more time for other hobbies.

Many students reported in the post-intervention questionnaires and video recordings that they were more aware of their own social media practices following the action research project. The peer mentors also stated that they were now more aware of how to identify fake news, edited and filtered pictures, and scams. Student D stated, “I have started checking news article pages to ensure that they are real.” This suggests that the students’ agency and self-awareness developed during the action research project as they were able to make independent choices in relation to their own social media practices.

Peer Mentoring Develops Relationships and Creates a Sense of Connectedness

The data from the post-intervention questionnaires, staff observations, and video recordings suggest that the peer mentors enjoyed working with a younger year group. Twelve students in the post-intervention questionnaire highlighted that they liked working with the Year 7 students as they don’t often get the opportunity to work with other Year groups. The peer mentors stated that they enjoyed interacting with the Year 7 students and seeing their different viewpoints. Student P said, “I liked being able to interact with younger years to share my knowledge and gain their insight.”

During the workshops, staff observed the peer mentors interacted with the Year 7s well, often walking around the tables and explaining things to them. One Year 7 student said, “I like how they related to us.” This comment shows that the relationship between the two-year groups was positive and that peer mentoring programme created positive relationships; an observation also noted by Lachter and Ruland (2018). The data show that 165 of the 166 Year 7 students liked that

the session was delivered by the Year 12 peer mentors and not a staff member. This was insightful as the peer mentors will be delivering more work to younger years groups in the future, including offering one-to-one emotional support. The relationships between Year 7 and Year 12 students created a sense of connectedness and togetherness, creating a positive emotional impact on both year groups.

Conclusion

Through the co-design of the student-led social media workshop, the Year 12 peer mentors effectively developed a sense of agency. This action research project provided them with a valuable opportunity to enhance and apply their leadership skills, thereby fostering the development of their own student agency. This was a successful action research project where different elements of student agency were shown within the participating girls. The peer mentors' confidence skills were developed in many ways and giving the mentors autonomy and independence to make their own decisions, evidently strengthened student agency. There were a few challenges during this process where students wanted more direction; however, after overcoming this barrier, they were able to work collaboratively. Students also changed their own social media habits due to taking part in the research project, and they became more self-aware of their online practices, creating strong independent women. The relationship between the year groups developed, which created a sense of connectedness and togetherness.

Following the success of this action research project, I would like to offer the peer mentors and other student leaders within my school more opportunities. I would like to develop the relationships between different year groups and give female student leaders the opportunity to develop their own leadership skills and agency in more detail. I would have preferred more time to engage with the peer mentors during the action phase, and not just over 12 weeks. In the future, I would ensure that all Year 7 students attend the same workshop instead of each class having a different topic, as this would provide consistency across the year group. I hope to create a similar

study conducted over an extended period, which would likely produce comparable results to those of this study, increasing leadership, student voice, and student agency.

Reflection Statement

I have thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the GARC cohort of 2025 and have enjoyed connecting with research again. I have been working in education for nearly eight years and feel that this action research project has allowed me to focus on issues that matter to young people. This process has not only changed the way I work but also allowed me to continue to grow as an educator. There have been so many amazing experiences throughout this process and it has been invaluable meeting and learning about educators across the world.

I would first like to thank my school, Wycombe High School for considering and allowing me to take part in this action research project and for supporting my long-term professional development. I would also like to thank my school mentors who supported me throughout this process. Thank you to my GARC fellows, I feel honoured to have shared this special experience with you and a special thank you to my GARC group, who have supported me from the beginning. We have created a special bond that will continue beyond GARC. A very heartfelt thank you to Nuria for being an outstanding research advisor and for always giving her time to support us. Thank you to my friends and family for your patience during this process. And finally, this action research project would not have been possible without my dedicated and fantastic Year 12 peer mentors who were enthusiastic and passionate throughout this journey. I could not have completed this without the support from you all, thank you all again!

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