Final year students mentoring first year students during clinical placement

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Background: the placement

All postgraduate student SLTs at the University of Sheffield take part in an Early Years clinical placement in their first year of study. In 2020 the format of this placement had to be changed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic:
-the placement usually includes 12 sessions: this was reduced to 8.
-students usually work face-to-face with one child but are also able to spend time with other children, experiencing a range of conditions and needs. This year, students worked with one child, either face-to-face or remotely. Those working remotely were able to observe each others' sessions, but those working in person had to leave the premises after their session, to comply with risk assessment procedures.

Final year mentors

The placement, therefore, had a shortfall, in both breadth and amount of clinical experience. To compensate for this, final-year students (who had completed the same placement in 2019-20) were approached to provide mentoring input. All those who participated did so voluntarily.

Student volunteer Mentors met with the Practice Educator, to discuss what might be possible. Mentors then came up with their own suggestions of what they felt they could offer, and some thoughts on how to deliver the support. From a longer list of ideas, the following areas were prioritised:
-case studies
-video demonstrations
-resource bank

Case studies

Eight Mentors each put together one or two case studies, based on children they had worked with in their first year. They included key information on the child's background and communication profile. First-year students (called 'students' in the rest of this piece) were each assigned two cases, and followed guided questions from the Mentors. These took them through the process of diagnosis and information-gathering, identification of key areas to target in therapy, and planning a theoretical session.

Students and Mentors then arranged a video call to discuss the case studies in detail. Prior to the call, students familiarised themselves with the case study and prepared answers to the questions the mentor had set. Calls lasted approximately

one hour and involved discussion of the case study and opportunities for the students to ask questions.

Mentors found this aspect of the project a good opportunity to write and reflect on case studies, to evaluate their own learning. Mentors enjoyed the clinical discussions that mirror those that would be had in the workplace. Mentors found that the students engaged with the material and in the discussion; however, they appreciated that some students had less experience in paediatrics than others, and this manifested as discussions that felt "one-sided" from the Mentors.

Video demonstrations
Many of the Mentors offered to run video calls with students to demonstrate certain therapy techniques, or to talk about particular approaches. Some of the areas offered were: Attention Autism, speech sounds intervention, general language support strategies, or clinical skills such as writing case notes or communicating with families. Topics were offered according to whatever the Mentor felt confident to deliver. Some included prepared Powerpoint presentations and other resources; others were less formal and simply involved talking with students about the topic area. The majority of the sessions were in a workshop structure, where the Mentor(s) gave background overviews of an approach including examples of evidence based practice, showed interventions where appropriate and encouraged questions from the students.

Students were given a list of session times, and could sign up for whatever they felt would be useful or interesting. They were expected to sign up for at least one session, but there was no upper limit. Sessions were scheduled for times which students' and Mentors' timetables both allowed. This sign-up system suited both cohorts well, as it allowed for flexibility.

Sessions were carried out using Google Meet. Where appropriate, presentations were sent after the sessions to the students in attendance. They were also uploaded to the Google Drive shared folder. The sessions weren't recorded: however, this would be welcomed in the future.

Resource bank
Towards the start of lockdown in spring 2020, students had created and contributed to a 'resource bank': a list of online resources which they had either used previously or found more recently. The Mentors then drew on this to create a new resource bank for the first-year students. This included a document with relevant social media accounts listed, a list of websites which could be used to find resources, and some sample resources which the mentors had previously created or used (for example, a video demonstrating 'bag time', or a pdf of an example visual timetable).

Students were welcome to use this resource bank, but also to add to it if they found or had any relevant resources.

Student response
Two Mentors created and disseminated a feedback form on the project to the students. Overall, the feedback was very positive.

<u>Case study sessions</u>
Students reported the case study sessions to be a helpful and constructive use of time, rating it an average of 9/10 in terms of helpfulness.

When asked about the most useful aspect of this activity, students said…
"Considering children with different difficulties to those we've encountered in the placement, considering how to approach this and (especially) the [Mentors] talking through what they did/would do with the child."

"[Mentors] could relate to their own experiences and reflect on what worked/didn't. It was especially useful for ideas with session planning/structure."

Students described how they found the inconsistency of the sessions difficult, as some Mentors asked for session plans and did not talk about them whilst others did. Some clarity on the expectations around session plans and level of detail needed would therefore be welcome, such as only planning one activity that would form part of a session.

<u>Demonstration sessions</u>
Students reported the demonstration sessions to be a helpful and constructive use of time, rating it an average of 9.5/10 in terms of helpfulness.

When asked about the most useful aspect of this activity, students said…
"The [Mentors] were very confident and prepared! Really thorough background research and explanation of why and how they run the interventions with children in "real life"."

"Seeing fellow students talk confidently about strategies, demonstrating them and Q&A time about their experiences on placement."

"I really liked how informative these sessions were and how they really related to our future professions (linking theory with practical application)."

Students suggested that a handout of the key points from a session would be a helpful resource, as this can point to further reading, and requested that all presentations were sent for those who could not attend. It would therefore be appropriate to offer to record these sessions next semester.

<u>Resource Bank</u>
There was mixed feedback on the usefulness of the resource bank, as some

students stated that they didn't know it was there, though it must be noted that it was in their clinical workbook. They rated its usefulness as 6.5/10.

Mentor response
Mentors found this opportunity worthwhile as it contributed to their clinical reflection skills and supervision skills. It encouraged Mentors to look at the evidence base, even if it wasn't applicable to their current mandatory placement. It was also really enjoyable to take the opportunity to get to know another cohort and share ideas and experiences.

Next steps
The mentoring pilot has been a clear success. Students have reported that they found it extremely helpful and valuable for their studies, and Mentors have reported that this opportunity allowed for the development of vital employment skills and further reflection on their learning so far.

In the first instance, existing Mentors will continue to offer their support in semester two, so that the second half of the first-year cohort can benefit.

In the future, Mentors have reported that they would benefit from templates of case studies and example demonstration sessions to help make their work more consistent. In particular, they would benefit from shared expectations of the students, such as only asking for one example activity rather than an entire session plan, in order to manage the workload of both Mentors and Students.

Going forward, the Division of Human Communication Sciences (HCS) hopes to be able to expand this model and establish the role of 'students as Mentors' more broadly throughout both its pre-registration courses, and to embed the concept of 'mentoring' into its students in the future. HCS feels that this will help to prepare our graduates for the demands of leadership in post, including when they take on student SLTs of their own.