

Mentoring teenagers with the National Citizen Service: Challenged by a dozen

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THE NATIONAL Citizen Service (NCS) powered by The Challenge is a three week programme where young people aged 15–17 complete various challenges. The first week is the 'Personal Challenge', where the young people take part in strenuous outdoor activities, such as hiking, rock climbing, raft building, canoeing, and abseiling. The second week is the 'Team Challenge', where they learn new skills such as sports and enterprise. During this time, they also visit areas of the local community (for example, a care home or a special needs club) and share with them their newly developed skills. The final week is the 'Campaign Design and Action', where they come together to design a campaign and a fundraising strategy in order to impact their local community positively. After this, they spend four weekends

carrying out the campaign. These activities give young people an opportunity to experience new things, learn new skills, learn about the community and meet new people that they would not usually meet. This is intended to help them discover their talents and potential, to gain confidence, and have fun.

After hearing recruiters at our universities about the opportunity to work as a mentor for 12 of these young people on their journey with the NCS, we applied online for the senior mentor role, which involved describing our past relevant experiences and explaining our reasons for applying. We were lucky enough to get through the first stage of the selection process, and next up was the interview! At the interview we were asked to devise and lead a variety of exciting and fun tasks which would help participants in a group to bond, and

some of us were selected to be mentors.

Our role was to look after teams of 12 young people out of a total of 60 from various backgrounds and a range of abilities, who came from various boroughs in North London. As mentors, it was our responsibility to provide pastoral care, and ensure that our team were getting along, having fun, and fully engaging in the activities. We also led evening sessions where we encouraged our team to share their experiences and reflect on the day and the team's performance.

Meeting our teams was exciting, and we enjoyed their novel way of looking at tasks and challenges and their resilience, especially during the sometimes difficult and frightening activities in the first week – such as abseiling! It was also amazing to see how people from very different backgrounds bonded so quickly and really encouraged each other – they even spurred us on when we had panic attacks at the top of the cliffs! They really embraced the opportunities given to them and their energy was contagious.

It wasn't all fun and games, though. In the evening sessions, it was sometimes difficult to keep the young people engaged if they were too tired from the day's activities and would not contribute, or were too excited to listen to each other. The first and second week were also residential, which was challenging for us, because it meant there was little time for our own thoughts, and trying to ensure that all the young people were in their own rooms was tiring, to say the least. During the second week, there was a mix-up with the food order which we had to sort out. One or two of the young people also had various health issues, and sometimes personal problems arose that had come up at home or during their three weeks on the Challenge, and it was our responsibility to deal with them.

One of the most interesting aspects of our NCS experience was that we could relate what we saw to concepts from our respective undergraduate degrees. In Sociology, cultural capital is a key concept, where children from different socio-economic backgrounds, status and classes grow up with different levels of

resources (such as education or money), and those with a higher social status are more likely to succeed. The Challenge showed that these class barriers can be broken down and that everyone can succeed when given a neutral platform. Each young person seized the opportunity to relate to others from different backgrounds whom they might not previously have had the chance to meet.

In psychology, we learn that identity is a crucial feature of people's self-concepts, and group memberships form a large part of identity. In order to decrease prejudices against out-group members, it is important to emphasise hierarchical identities (for example, I am 'Welsh', but above that I am 'British', and above that I am 'human') – to show that, to a certain extent, we are all the same. This was clear to see within the Challenge, because although the different teams were very competitive at times, they were always friendly to each other and even encouraged other teams when they were undertaking a difficult task – in other words, they viewed themselves as belonging to their team, but also to the NCS group as a whole.

We hope that all the young people at the Challenge graduated from it with new friends, new skills, a sense of an egalitarian community, confidence in their abilities, and a satisfied feeling of achievement.

We certainly developed our empathy, compassion and patience during the Challenge, as well as new skills, and a deeper insight into ourselves and how far we are able to push our own boundaries. We would recommend mentoring on the Challenge to energetic and resilient people because it is a fun and rewarding experience, but for those who demand eight hours sleep a night – approach with caution!

Contact information

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