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What added value does peer support bring?: Insights from principals and teachers on the utility and challenges of a school based mentoring programme

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Over the past decade, there has been greater attention placed on the potential value of peer support models, particularly in school contexts (Cowie, 2011 and others). This paper uses the case study of an Irish school based peer mentoring programme to identify the added value that peer led models of social support for children and young people offer in a school setting. The Irish national youth organisation, Foróige, runs the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) school-based mentoring programme in over 60 Irish secondary schools, with the aim of improving young people's transition to secondary school. Qualitative research was undertaken with 36 principals and teachers in secondary schools operating the programme. Five specific ways in which the peer mentoring model adds value to existing support in schools are identified and discussed, while challenges associated with the model are also highlighted.

Key words: peer support, youth mentoring, school transition.

Introduction

Peer support models, including befriending, mediation, mentoring and counselling, have become increasingly prevalent in schools over recent years, with a survey by Houlston, Smith and Jessel (2009) finding that an estimated 62% of English primary and secondary schools are using a structured peer support system. While there are wide variations in focus and organisation, peer support programmes generally train young people to provide effective support to other students, with a view to promoting social and emotional well-being and countering anti-social behaviour. Cowie and Smith (2010) found that peer support models can help young people to deal with challenges such as bullying, while also creating a more positive ethos in the school community. This paper reports on qualitative research undertaken in relation to a peer support model, the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) school based mentoring programme in Ireland, designed to support young people in the transition to secondary school. After setting the theoretical and programmatic context of the programme, the paper focuses specifically on the perspectives of principals and teachers in relation to the added value that the peer support model offers in comparison to adult-led forms of support in the school setting and highlights some of the key challenges associated with the delivery of programmes of this nature.

Peer support

The social support literature provides a strong theoretical basis for peer support programmes, with clear relationships between the perceived availability of social support and social and emotional well-being (Cohen and Willis, 1985). As children move into adolescence, support from peers takes on a greater significance, with higher levels of friendship and support from the peer group associated with greater emotional well-being (Buchanan and Bowen, 2008). However, peer relationships can be associated with significant emotional distress where exclusion and bullying occurs (Cowie, 2011). Cowie (2009), Dolan and Brady (2012) and others have argued that children and young people are uniquely placed to offer effective social support to peers and that models are needed to ensure that this form of support is mobilised for the benefit of all children and young people, but particularly for those experiencing difficulties. There is a growing body of empirical evidence supporting the case for peer support initiatives. For example, Houlston, Smith and Jessel (2011) found that the use of peer support initiatives was related to students greater perceived frequency of social

support from other students, highlighting also that such programmes may be of particular value to children who have been bullied.

Peer support in the context of school transition

It is acknowledged that the transition from primary to secondary school can be a difficult one for young people, as they must move from the closely-knit primary school to the larger, more impersonal and complex environment that characterises most secondary schools. The pressures faced by young people can be academic, procedural and social and can be exacerbated for those students who also experience personal or family difficulties (Akos and Galassi, 2004). The transition process can influence the young person's feeling of connectedness to school and can impact on their decision regarding how long to stay in school. The literature points to a range of actions that schools can take to ease the transition process for incoming students, with the aim of enhancing their connectedness to school. It is argued that schools must take responsibility for student welfare and should pay greater attention to the relational aspects of school transition (Stelfox & Catts, 2012).

Cross-age peer mentoring is a form of structured support provided by older children or young people to younger peers. According to Karcher (2007), cross-age peer mentoring typically takes place in school settings as a means of supporting younger students within the school environment. There is some research evidence that cross-age peer mentoring has resulted in positive effects for mentors and mentees (Karcher 2007), though there has been a paucity of randomised controlled trial studies. For mentees, studies have shown improvements in attitudes to and connectedness to school and peers, self-efficacy, academic achievement, social skills and reduction of behaviour problems, while peer mentors develop skills and experiences that can further personal and career development. Karcher (2007) emphasises that cross-age peer mentoring programmes must be well-structured and properly managed in order to avoid any potential negative outcomes for the young people involved. The Foróige BBBS schools based programme can be considered a cross-age peer mentoring programme and is now described.

Description of the programme

Foróige is a national youth organisation which currently engages 50,000 young people annually in Ireland in its range of clubs, projects and services. Foróige introduced the Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring programme to Ireland, and developed a schools based mentoring model in 2003, whereby the core practices from the BBBS community based

programme (including one-to-one matching, interviewing candidates, matching, supervision and evaluation) were adapted to suit a school context. While there is a BBBS peer mentoring programme in the USA (called High School Bigs), Foróige did not replicate this programme, as it had largely done with the community programme, but developed its own model through a process of piloting, reviewing and adaptation. In 2007, the BBBS programme received an investment from Atlantic Philanthropies and the One Foundation, which enabled it to significantly increase its capacity to reach a stage where there are now 65 schools operating the programme, with 1,100 first year students involved.

The programme is essentially aimed at supporting the transition of young people from primary to secondary school and helping them to feel settled at school. Like the BBBS community based mentoring programme, the school programme is based on the belief that a positive relationship with an older friend can act to support the development of a young person. It is also seen to bring benefits to the mentor, in terms of their own personal and career development. The approach to relationship building is developmental rather than prescriptive, meaning that the focus is on helping the mentee to feel relaxed and make meaningful connections in the school setting, rather than imposing goals on the relationship. Because there are no explicit measurable goals set for the match nor is the friendship dependent on particular goals being achieved, the relationship might be best described as befriending rather than mentoring (Befriending Network Scotland, n.d, pp.24-25).

Matches are expected to be of the same gender and involve just one senior student as a mentor to one junior student. The programme is expected to run for the full academic year, under the supervision of a designated school staff member. Participation is voluntary for all parties involved. Participants, both mentors and mentees, must be given information about the programme, apply to take part, secure parental permission for their participation and be interviewed. Participants receive training that outlines their expected roles and some of the challenges and issues they may encounter. In some schools, all first year students are encouraged to participate while in other schools, the programme is available to a subset of first year students. The issues associated with both options will be discussed later in the paper.

The matched pairs meet weekly in a classroom or other school room for a minimum of 40 minutes and the designated link person is responsible for the supervision of these meetings and overseeing individual or group-based activities. Participants complete ‘match report

cards' at the end of every session and also complete a questionnaire at the end of every term. A recognition event is held at the end of the school year to acknowledge the contribution of both mentors and mentees and to award certificates of participation. The expected operating standards for the programme are outlined in the BBBS 'School Manual', a copy of which is given to every school.

The school is expected to sign a formal agreement indicating their willingness to abide by the core features of the BBBS model and to run the programme in accordance with the school manual. They are asked to designate a staff member as co-ordinator for the mentoring programme and are provided with a range of resources, including the 'school manual' and activities booklet. This link teacher receives training from BBBS staff in operating the programme and their role is to oversee the running of the programme in the school. They are expected to contact the Foróige / BBBS Project Officer if any difficulties arise. The Project Officer is also required to undertake an annual evaluation of the BBBS School programme in each of the schools for which they have responsibility.

Methodology

This paper is based on a larger external evaluation of the programme conducted in 2012 by researchers at NUI, Galway (Brady et al, 2012). At the time this research was undertaken, there were 64 schools operating the BBBS programme in Ireland. The study sought to focus on those schools in which the programme was well-established and operating in compliance with the programme model, in order to explore its benefits and challenges when fully operational. A purposive sample of 26 schools was deemed to meet this criteria and representatives from 23 schools agreed to take part in the research. The overall study involved participatory focus groups with mentors and mentees, interviews with Foróige case workers and interviews with principals or vice-principals and link teachers. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the author's institution.

A detailed analysis of all stakeholders perspectives is provided in the evaluation report (Brady et al, 2012) but, due to limited space, this paper focuses specifically on the perspectives of principals and link teachers regarding the benefits and challenges associated with the peer support model. Interviews were sought from both the principal and the designated link teacher for the programme in each of the 26 schools sampled. A total of 38 telephone interviews were undertaken with representatives of the 23 schools, including 21

link teacher interviews and 17 principal or vice-principal interviews. Participants were asked about their experience of running the programme and the benefits and challenges associated with it. Permission was sought from respondents to record the interview and all recordings were transcribed fully. The transcripts were read through several times to give a sense of the key issues and themes emerging. The data was thematically coded, using Nvivo software, according to the questions for each stakeholder group and sub-themes were then developed under each question. When all data had been coded, the researcher re-read the transcripts and interview notes in full to ensure that nothing had been missed and some revisions were made.

The paper now moves on to outline the perspectives of principals and teachers regarding the specific advantages or 'added-value' of peer support that distinguish it from adult or teacher support in a school context. This question was not directly posed to respondents but analysis of the data suggests that five unique features associated with peer support can be identified. The paper then highlights some of the key challenges identified by principals and link teachers in implementing a programme of this nature.

What added value does peer support bring?

Firstly, it can be argued that the support provided by older peers is effectively matched to the needs of young people receiving it. Weiss (1976) suggests that people going through a state of transition benefit from three different types of support. One is an expert, which in this case would be a teacher, who has a professional understanding of the issue at hand. The second is the veteran, who is a person who has experienced the stressor and can draw on his or her own experiences in discussing the issue, thus demonstrating that survival and thriving is possible. The third form of support described by Weiss (1976) is the role played by fellow participants –who can share similar experiences. It can be argued that, in the case of school transition, expert and participant support are already available from teachers and fellow students respectively, but the veteran support may not be available to groups of young people who don't have older siblings or relatives in the school. In addition to formally mobilising the support from veterans, programmes such as this also create a space in which all expert, veteran and fellow participants can come together with a specific focus on encouraging issues to be addressed and supportive relationships to be developed.

In this research, principals and link teachers were of the view that that young people may be more likely to listen to older peers as they respect the fact that they have 'been in their shoes'

and can thus identify with their experiences. Likewise, the older student can tailor the support to the needs of the young person as they have a good idea of how they may be feeling. There was a belief that the first year student would be more likely to seek support with particular issues from an older peer than from a teacher. Link teacher 13 quoted below describes how she asked the senior students to give an input to first years on BBBS at the start of the year and felt that they were very attuned to the specific needs and anxieties of their younger peers.

> They have somebody to go to, a student to go to so they can feel free to say things to that person that they mightn't say to a teacher, if they feel they're under pressure with something or if they feel for example something is not working well. Somebody closer to them in age who has been through exactly or very much the same experience within the recent past. (Principal 2)

> Last year I decided to get the fifth years to introduce themselves to the first years and to list out the benefits of becoming a 'Little'. I found that more effective than myself doing it because when you hand over the bit of power to these young people they have a way of kind of tapping into the child's needs as opposed to an older person who doesn't maybe fully remember what it would be like to be a child as it were. (Link teacher 13)

Cutrona (2000) refers to the concept of optimal, matching in social support, whereby the support offered should match the needs of the intended recipients. Peer support programmes have the potential to score highly in relation to this dimension of support, particularly in relation to the provision of practical and emotional support in relation to school matters.

Closely related to the previous point, the second feature associated with peer mentoring relates to the concept of subsidiarity, which requires than any tasks should be undertaken at as decentralised level as possible. The participants in this research highlighted that many of the issues the younger students may need help with are 'little things' that they may feel are too trivial to bother a teacher with. Some respondents felt that one of the strengths of the programme is that first year students get answers to any questions they may have. While the point was made that this reduces the burden on teachers in relation to answering queries from first year students, the principal advantage of this feature of peer support is that is means that small issues don't escalate into bigger challenges for the student.

> it's the help with the small things…..because we tend to hit the big things, you know? It's the minor issues that they have which really aren't on the scale of things at all, but for a child they can be huge you know? ….It can be the locker, it can be the school bag, organising the diary, organising something, it might be bullying, it might be easier for them to say to a student rather than say it to a teacher. There are so many little things. (Principal 2)

The findings suggest that some schools adopt a policy of subsidiarity in relation to supporting students – in other words aiming to resolve the issue with the support of a peer mentor before resorting to more formal modes of support. For example, Principal 16 quoted below said that her school has a policy whereby they will see if an issue regarding a first year student can be resolved through the support of his or her mentor, which they see as preferable to intervention by a teacher.

> There would be certain situations that would be brought to our attention, or we would notice ourselves in terms of girls not settling in too well, or parents in touch with us saying she's really lonesome, or she's not settling in with her class group, or she thinks that so and so is intimidating her wherever her locker is or whatever, and our protocol would be 'does she have a big sister?' And when she does we're so relieved. That's where we go first. Let's try and sort this out with her big sister..... see is there a way she can be present at lunch time or in that locker area, or have a little word with her to see what the reality is. …. invariably when there is a situation that we can use the support of the big sister, we do. (Principal 16)

A third dimension associated with peer support relates to the fact that it can have a greater 'reach' than adult-led models of support. The peer supporter is more likely to move seamlessly in the first year student's milieu and thus can provide timely and appropriate support where required. For example, they mix on school corridors, at lockers and on the school bus. Teachers and principals were aware of the value of having someone look out for the younger student in these contexts, where issues may arise that teachers would not be aware of. This was seen as furthering the reach of the school's pastoral care efforts, enabling students to receive supports in the contexts of their day to day interactions, rather than formally through designated support staff. Principals 17 and 21 described how mentors

would sometimes bring issues to the attention of teachers where the welfare of their mentee was concerned, for example in relation to suspected bullying.

> We do find that from time to time that that particular person who is their Big Brother or Big Sister will be looking out for them even in the corridors, the hall. It might be something as simple as they might come up and they might just say to you on the quiet, just seen such a one there, do you know what I mean? (Principal 17)

> Definitely in terms of the anti-bullying ... it makes people feel safe and if there's any little incidents they'll come to us here. It can be a line for getting a certain amount of information on that. (Principal 21)

Principals described how giving this responsibility to older students can create a culture of support in the school, whereby older students look out for the welfare of younger students, regardless of whether they are their mentee or not. While some of this may have occurred naturally, there is a view that the training received through the programme and the attitude it promotes make these students more aware of their responsibilities in this regard and gives them permission to act in response to any concerns they may have. This reflects Cowie's (2011) finding that the adoption of a peer support policy can give bystanders 'permission' to monitor behaviour and challenge bullying when they observe it.

> It kind of creates a system whereby, it actually makes the senior student, even though they always would have been very aware but it actually kind of, now that they have their role, it's amazing when they're given a role how they'll actually take it on board. It may not necessarily be the student that they are looking out for as their Big Brother or Big Sister; it may actually be another student but because of the training, the idea has been formed in their head. (Principal 17)

> They may have seen something happening in the yard before but never actually had the responsibility to act upon it. Now when they've been given the role, the mentors themselves see something they weren't happy with in the yard, they know that it's their responsibility to do something about it. (Link teacher 11)

A fourth benefit associated with the peer mentoring model is that the relationships developed can be sustainable and continue beyond the school boundaries. While most of the examples given referred to support provided in the context of school, some respondents spoke of

examples of how the mentoring relationship was of benefit to the mentee in other arenas. For example, link teacher 9 described how peer mentors introduced their mentees to youth clubs that they were involved with. As this is a vulnerable group, she saw this as a very positive development as it was enhancing the infrastructure of support or protective factors in the lives of these young boys. In this way, the support of older peers can be conceptualised as a form of linking social capital (Stelfox & Catts, 2012), whereby the younger students are supported to build relationships in contexts that are likely to be of value to them.

> I can see bigger boys offering to take younger boys into the youth groups for example, you know, come on, I'll bring you down and you can get a form and your mam can sign it and whatever. ... I heard a couple of them offer this to a few of the younger boys who don't get out very much…..There would be huge issues around this community with drug use and a lot of crime on the streets. So for getting boys off the streets and keeping them in school, you know, I feel that this is a positive programme, to get these young boys who would be maybe very isolated and on the edges of society, to get them into youth groups and community groups, the after school clubs. So it's a little organic thing where it's reaching feelers out a little bit. ... So it has become more than it initially was. (Link teacher 9)

Cowie (2011) draws our attention to the importance of the social context in the emergence of bullying behaviour and highlights the role of school ethos in challenging such behaviour. A fifth dimension associated with the peer support model in this research is that it offers a means of challenging the negative power relationships that can exist between older and younger age groups in school, dynamics that can be a precursor to bullying behaviour. For example, Principal 20 quoted below spoke of how, in the past, there was a prevailing belief that incoming students would be subject to ridicule and practical jokes and that older students were within their rights to look down on their younger peers. He and others believe that the BBBS programme has helped to counter that culture.

> I think it's a radical overturning of the sort of the unconscious pecking order because there's kind of a tendency for somebody of 12 to look down on somebody of 11. So there is a kind of a pecking order that creates sort of negative tensions and disparagement, you know... I'm superior to you, that kind of thing. And it's natural and understandable in a way but it's an extremely primitive instinct. And unless you recognise it and set up social structures that actually overturn that... it can be very

> destructive and corrosive of relationships in the community. So I think ..there's kind of an egalitarian quality to it …. something like this makes it formally not only acceptable but desirable to have those kind of virtues of mutual assistance and all of that sort of thing, sort of hand of friendship and you're welcome here, this is a good place to be. Even the very fact that senior students are willing to do this gives that message. I think it's very important. (Principal 20)

Challenges associated with the model

Principals and link teachers were asked if they had experienced any challenges or issues in delivering the programme. A number of respondents said that they had experienced minor challenges but none that could not be resolved easily, while others raised a variety of issues, which are now discussed.

Firstly, Karcher (2007) notes that the issue of ensuring adequate 'dosage' as a key issue facing school based mentoring programmes and this issue was also highlighted in this research. Some of the respondents spoke of their difficulties in finding a suitable time slot for the programme within the busy school timetable. While most schools run the programme at lunchtime, this can cause problems with people not attending or coming late, yet they were reluctant to take up class time with a programme that is meant to be voluntary. Furthermore, from time to time, senior students may have work experience, additional study commitments or sporting fixtures and are not available to meet. Some of the link teachers said that the momentum of the programme can be damaged if there has been a long period with no meetings. If meetings to not take place on a weekly basis as required in the programme model, there is a risk that the relationships will not develop to a level that they are meaningful and beneficial for the parties involved.

Secondly, a number of respondents highlighted challenges related to the workload associated with the programme, which often falls to one teacher to manage. While this person is supported by the BBBS Project Officers, running the programme can be time consuming, especially at the start of the year when interviews are conducted and matches made. In some schools, the link teacher seeks a commitment from other colleagues to help with the programme, while in larger schools, a post of responsibility may be allocated to the programme.

A third challenge relates to how participants are selected for the programme. In some

schools, all first years are encouraged to participate, whereas in others a smaller group of students are included on the basis of need. Some schools have grappled with the question of which is preferable. They can see the value in offering the programme to all first years but may face a difficulty in getting enough good quality mentors in the senior cycle. Those who prioritise on the basis of need are aware that some 'needy' students may 'slip through the net' and they may have to make difficult decisions about who is given a place or not. Furthermore, those who are felt to need the programme or would be likely to benefit from it may not apply to take part. One principal said that they have had a challenge in selling the programme to first year students. Because it's voluntary, one or two key opinion formers may decide they don't want to do it and other students decide not to apply either.

Related to the previous point, some schools highlighted that not all senior students will make good mentors so it is better to select the most suitable candidates and prioritise providing a quality programme. However, this also raises a challenge because there may be students who have not yet shown leadership potential but may be good mentors if give the opportunity. One principal described how she and her team believe they need to take risks in this regard, in order to promote equal opportunity and avoid elitism.

> It's difficult you know because you don't want it to be the 30 most needy first years that are in the programme and the let's say 30 golden girls of fourth year. You're looking at these students and you're thinking.. it would be a good opportunity, you know, she has lots of potential, none of it is materialising yet but this might be just what she needs and so you give opportunities. So I don't know what you can do about it because you present opportunities and it sometimes comes back in your face and that's just human nature. That's life. And I think it would be wrong to just say well all of these girls who have ticked all the right leadership boxes are now going to get a chance to be Big Sisters because it just becomes so elitist then and that's not what you want (Principal 16)

Some of the respondents said that they have problems with absenteeism and that some matches don't work out for various reasons. The mentor may not be committed to the match and fail to turn up for the committed times, which can be hurtful for the mentee. Schools said that they have some floating mentors who can fill in for the absent mentor but it still raises the issue that the mentee may feel that it is their fault. There have also been occasions where the mentee did not want to continue in the programme, which may also be damaging to the

self-esteem of their mentor. These issues, which can result in early termination of matches and hurt for both parties, have been found in mentoring and befriending programmes (Dolan and Brady, 2011; Philip and Spratt, 2007).

Conclusion

Peer support or peer mentoring models are not a panacea to the challenges and difficulties faced by young people in making the transition to secondary school but is argued that they have a unique and valuable contribution to make, in conjunction with other pastoral care initiatives in school settings. The added-value or 'unique selling point' of the BBBS school based programme is perceived to relate to its role in mobilising support between older and younger peers. Principals and link teachers believe that peer mentors are uniquely placed to understand the challenges experienced by their younger peers and can effectively tailor support to their needs. It is argued that advice is more likely to be appropriate and taken seriously if offered by an older peer who understands what it is like to be in such a position. In addition to being perceived as an effective and relevant source of support for young people, peer support is distinguishable by its potential availability in places and contexts where formal supervision may be limited, such as on school buses and in recreational areas. Reflecting previous research on peer support models (Cowie, 2009; Cowie and Smith, 2010), the peer mentoring model is believed to prevent the escalation of issues for young people and to bolster the efforts of school principals and teachers to identity and respond to bullying incidents. While the model is conceptualised as a support for school transition, the feedback from principals and teachers suggests that it has had a much wider impact, helping to ensure that a culture of support permeates the school culture. However, the findings show that programmes of this nature also present challenges in terms of selecting participants (both mentors and mentees), ensuring adequate 'dosage' and managing workloads.

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