



**WHAT ADDED VALUE DOES PEER SUPPORT  
BRING?:**  
*INSIGHTS FROM THE BBBS SCHOOL-BASED  
MENTORING PROGRAMME IN IRELAND*

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# OVERVIEW

- Why peer support / peer support programmes?
- Issues in school transition
- Intervening to mobilise peer support at times of transition – overview of the BBBS school based programme
- Methodology
- Key insights from research regarding the perceived added value associated with peer support programmes in a school context



# PEER SUPPORT



Young people, like all of us, need support :

- If we perceive that others are there for us, we are less stressed (stress buffering)
- If others are there for us, we can cope with stress better (coping) (Cohen & Willis, 1985)

Peer relationships take on greater significance in adolescence

While relationships can be supportive, they can also be negative and destructive



# PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

- Train young people to provide effective support to other students
- Found to promote social & emotional well-being, counter bullying (Cowie & Smith, 2010)
- Operated by 62% of English primary and secondary schools (Houlston, Smith and Jessel, 2009)



# SCHOOL TRANSITION

- Move from close-knit primary school to more complex secondary school-
  - Academic, procedural and social pressures (Akos & Galassi, 2004)
  - Children lose and must re-form their social capital (Stellfox & Catts, 2012)
  - Can impact on well-being and decisions about staying in school
- Investing time and resources in how relationships can be built, nurtured and sustained should be a priority for schools (Stellfox & Catts, 2012)



# FORÓIGE BBBS SCHOOL-BASED MENTORING PROGRAMME

- Senior student 'matched' with incoming 1<sup>st</sup> year student
- Aims to support the first year student to settle in school & have a positive experience
- Matches meet weekly under supervision of a staff member
- Mentors trained, programme standards apply
- Approx. 65 schools operating the programme in Ireland, 1,100 first year students involved



# METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative evaluation study
- Interviews with principals and link teachers in 23 schools (n=38), Foróige project officers (n=12)
- Participatory focus groups in 5 schools, involving 50 mentees and 56 mentors



## KEY FINDINGS

- Mentees valued new friendships, having fun, security of knowing that someone was 'looking out' for them ...
- Mentees valued opportunity to take leadership, make friends, have fun..
- Principals feel first year students are more safe, secure & settled at school
- Structured, evidence-based nature of the programme attractive to schools



## KEY QUESTION

*Drawing on the experience of this programme, what 'added-value' can a peer support model bring in a school context that an adult-led model could not?*



# Support provided is effectively matched to needs of the incoming students

People benefit from 3 types of support at times of transition:

- Expert - **teacher**
- Veteran – **older peer**
- Fellow participants – **peer**

(Weiss, 1976)



*‘They have somebody 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)

*‘When you hand over the bit of power to these young people they have a way 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)



*I think you can look at the students who are involved in Big Brother Big Sister say and the students who are not - the ones who are are a lot more maybe happy in school. ....even just being able to sit around and give out about the teachers or something, if they're not having a good day in school or whatever that someone will say yeah, 'I know what it's like to face that science test, you know, you will get through it' or whatever, there's that extra support that's there for them. (Link teacher 15)*



# Supports subsidiarity

...whereby problems are addressed at the most decentralised level possible

*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, 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)



# Can have a 'greater reach' than adult-led models of support

*Puts 'eyes and ears' where teachers don't go*

*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 say to you on the quiet, 'just seen such a one there, do you know what I mean?' (Principal 17)*



# Challenges hierarchies and encourages a culture of support in the school

- Gives the older students 'permission' and skills to look out for younger students

*'Learning the responsibility of taking care of someone who is younger than me and I learned how to treat myself in their presence'* (Mentor, school 1)

- Support seen to extend beyond the actual meeting to permeate the school environment
  - Younger students learn that supportive relationships are part of the ethos of the school
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*'I think it's a radical overturning of the unconscious pecking order because there's kind of a tendency for somebody of 12 to look down on somebody of 11. ....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. .... 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.'* (Principal 20)



## Helps to prevent the emergence & escalation of problems

*Since it's come in I feel the first years have a better sense of belonging. They've a place to go, they know where to go. It's easier to build relationships. .... We're dealing with problems now through getting to know each other in Big Brother Big Sister where they're asking the question now rather than we finding out 3 weeks later when the problem has become a real problem.* (Link teacher 4)

*I've no doubt it can act, maybe even to a small degree to counter the bullying that does go on and the slagging and stuff like that you know. So if we didn't have it, that's the kind of stuff that might go unchecked a lot more.* (Principal 9)

# Relationships can be sustainable beyond school boundaries

*I can see bigger boys offering to take younger boys into the youth groups for example .....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. We find that to be very positive.... So it has become more than it initially was.*

(Link teacher 9)



## BENEFITS BUT ALSO CHALLENGES...

- Need to adhere to programme model for 'best practice'
- Ensuring attendance / 'dosage'
- Finding space in busy school timetable
- Workload / responsibility
- Universal or targeted approach



## CONCLUSION

- Peer mentoring can promote effective social support to assist with school transition
- Welcomed by principals, teachers, young people as a model that 'adding value' in a school context
- Reflects previous research findings that peer support can counter bullying and nurture a more supportive culture in schools (Cowie, H., 2011; Houlston et al, 2009)



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