Title

Exploring the impact of S6 youth mentors on the wellbeing and attainment of S1 mentees: addressing the poverty related attainment and wellbeing gap.

What did we ask? (Research Questions)

- What impact will a youth mentoring system have on the wellbeing of disadvantaged children and young people?
- What impact will a youth mentoring system have on the attainment of disadvantaged children and young people?
- Can a youth mentoring system contribute to closing the poverty-related attainment gap?

What is the evidence base?

A consultation exercise, seeking stakeholder views of local mental health supports, found that most young people preferred to turn to their peers for advice and support, rather than adults (East Renfrewshire Council, 2016). The Educational Psychology Service responded to this consultation by piloting a youth mentoring programme to establish whether this could contribute to improvements in pupil wellbeing, and closing the attainment gap.

Youth mentoring is defined as:

"A program or intervention…to promote positive youth outcomes via relationships between young persons…and specific non-parental adults (or older youth)…acting in a non-professional helping capacity" (DuBois, D.L., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J.E., Silverthorn, N. & Valentine, J.C., 2011, p.66).

The features of effective youth mentoring practice include:

- formalised, systematic approaches with training, support and management (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF), 2010)
- effective mentor-mentee matching processes (Cavell, T.A., & Elledge, C., 2014)
- consistency and regularity of meetings (Gulati and King, 2009; DuBois and Karcher 2014)
- careful consideration of session content, balance of power and decision making within

the relationship (Keller, 2005)

- acknowledgement of risks such as constructive guidance being experienced as invalidating or demeaning (Du Bois & Kercher, 2014)
- time for trust and attunement to develop (Rhodes, 2005)

Evidence suggests that youth mentoring can impact positively on:

- learning and development across social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Houlston, Smith, & Jessel, 2009)
- attainment (MBF, 2010; Nelson, 2003; Parsons et al., 2008)
- confidence and self-esteem (MBF, 2010; Smith and Watson, 2004)
- wellbeing (MBF, 2010)
- transitions (Parsons et al., 2008)
- school climate (MBF, 2010; Smith and Watson, 2004; Stader and Gagnepain, 2000)
- behaviour (MBF, 2010; Parsons et al., 2008; Smith and Watson, 2004)
- exclusions (Parsons et al., 2008)

Youth mentoring is described as a promising but underdeveloped form of prevention (Cavell, T.A., & Elledge, C., 2014) with an evidence base of modest impact (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper, 2002). In one randomised controlled study, no statistically significant impact was found on academic outcomes, high risk behaviour or interpersonal relationships (Bernstein, Rappaport, Olsho, Hunt & Levin, 2009). More robust, quantitative, long-term evaluation is needed to assess impact on resilience and future outcomes around attainment and positive destinations (MBF, 2010). Effective youth mentoring relies on the development of mutuality, empathy and trust (Rhodes and DuBois, 2008). As these can take time to develop, quantitative evaluation over a short term may not be sufficient. Youth mentoring is however considered to merit further enquiry to explore whether it can contribute to the supportive, holistic approach that is required for Scotland's most vulnerable young people to successfully close the attainment gap.

What did we do?

Fourteen S1 pupils (6 boys and 8 girls, aged 11-12 years) from areas categorised as SIMD 1-3 or whom were looked after were referred to the youth mentoring programme by Principal Teachers of Pupil Support (PTPS). PTPS referred on the basis that pupils were thought to

be vulnerable and could potentially benefit from youth mentoring.

Fourteen S6 pupils (3 boys and 11 girls, aged 11-12 years) were recruited as mentors following the launch of the programme at an S6 assembly, awareness raising posters displayed around the school and an application process (application forms and interviews).

Mentor-mentee pairings were matched by PTPS in consultation with an EP based on staff knowledge of the pupils' interests, personal qualities, skills, and character traits.

The youth mentoring programme comprised of:

- Two formal training sessions for mentors delivered by EP (aimed at providing awareness of the benefits of peer mentoring, active listening, solution oriented approaches, thought monitoring and unhelpful thinking patterns, resilience)
- 'Meet your Mentor' session (attended by mentors and mentees and consisting ice breakers, introduction of pairings, input delivered by EP on confidentiality)
- Weekly mentor-mentee meetings (arranged by partnerships over a 15 week period). Sessions involved working through specific activities provided by EPS with time for mentor chosen games and activities included)
- Weekly supervision sessions for mentors with EP

To facilitate evaluation of the impact of the programme on attainment and wellbeing, data was gathered from the following sources:

- The Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (Sandra Prince-Embury, 2006) completed by mentees (pre and post)
- Mentor and Mentee Focus Groups
- Mentee Post Intervention Questionnaire

What have we found?

The Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents

Comparison of the pre and post resiliency measure found no significant difference in mentee scores.

However, in spite of this, a range of encouraging findings were highlighted via analysis of the focus groups and mentee questionnaire data, as outlined below.

Mentor and Mentee Focus Groups

Mentor and mentee focus groups were held to gather young people's views on the programme. The data gathered highlighted a range of strengths and opportunities.

Mentees reported that:

- discussing difficult situations, such as bullying, was often easier with their mentor than with adults;

- they would like the programme to continue;

- they felt meeting with their mentor had been a beneficial experience;

- they would recommend the programme to other S1 pupils.

Mentors reported that:

- regular contact with the mentee and structured activities allowed strong relationships to develop, a key difference from the school buddying system;

- mentees seemed to have increased confidence over the course of the programme and demonstrated improved social interaction during and out-with sessions;

- they themselves developed their communication and interpersonal skills, gained experience of working with individual young people, felt more prepared for careers in helping roles and further education and had increased confidence.

Mentee Post-Intervention Questionnaire

Analysis of the results from mentee questionnaires highlighted a number of encouraging findings:

- 9 of the 13 mentees were able to identify at least one SHANARRI indicator in which having a peer mentor had an impact. Of those, five mentees were able to identify 4 or more wellbeing indicators in which they noticed a positive impact. A selection of positive comments made by the pupils in response to this question are outlined below:
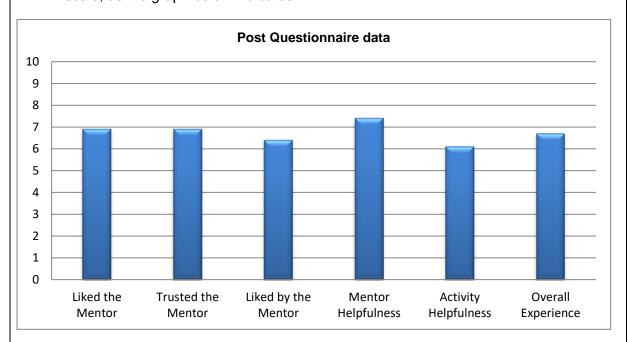
"She helped me feel safe, active, respected, responsible and included. She helps me feel more included in school and I didn't feel included. She always made me feel safe, she never let anyone bully me and she always respected me."

"He would always make sure I felt safe in school and at home."

"When you feel nerves about a test she told me to try my best."

- as a group, Mentees were generally positive about their relationships on a 1-10 likert scale, as the graph below indicates:

Post Questionnaire data

- pairings that met more regularly rated the overall experience more positively
- the project had the biggest impact on the wellbeing of mentees who had the most positive relationship with their mentor, specifically where they reported liking and trusting their mentor and where they felt liked by their mentor. A selection of comments made in relation to these areas are included below:

"We didn't really have a lot of things to talk about because we weren't very alike. I trusted him because we got told about how they weren't going to tell anyone anything. So that made me feel like I could trust him."

"I liked my mentor, she was really nice. I trusted her a lot."

"I liked my mentor. She was nice and kind, she was very helpful and never rude. I trusted her lots and lots. She was like a sister to me."

"Easy to talk to and gave good advice."

"I could tell him secrets. That meant a lot to me and he won't spread it."

"It was the way he looked at me and talked. It sounded like he was interested and wanted to hear more."

- there were some partnerships that were not successful, underlining the importance of commitment to the programme. A selection of negative comments included:

"I did not trust my mentor because I never saw her that much."

"Well she never came to see me. She only came to meet with me when she wanted and that was like only 2-3 out of the whole period of time."

- while the matching process was considered to be successful for most participants, the following comment underlined the importance of and the difficulties in the matching process:
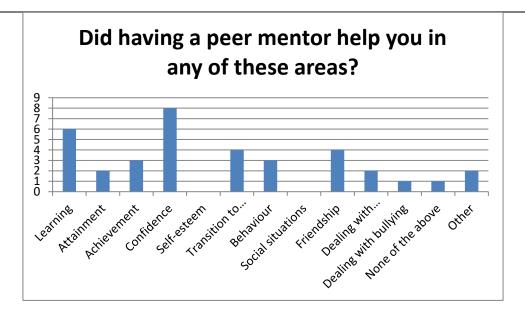
"Well we really didn't have anything to talk about because we liked different things so it was hard to talk and find things we both liked."

- Mentees were able to identify a range of areas in which the intervention helped them. Comments in relation to this included the following:

"She helped me be more confident to speak to more people."

"My S6 mentor helped me with all of this stuff. She talked me through the stuff like bullying and high anxiety and dealing with emotions and behaviour and friendships etc. and it has really helped me with the ups and downs in my life and it has made me into a better person and who I am today."

Did having a peer mentor help you in any of these areas?

Bar chart showing responses across the following areas (vertical axis 0 to 9):
- Learning: 6
- Attainment: 2
- Achievement: 3
- Confidence: 8
- Self-esteem: 0
- Transition to...: 4
- Behaviour: 3
- Social situations: 0
- Friendship: 4
- Dealing with...: 2
- Dealing with bullying: 1
- None of the above: 1
- Other: 2

- Of the 13 mentees, 9 said they would recommend having a peer mentor to other S1 pupils.

"Because I'm sure it would help them like it helped me to open up about how I was feeling and who I had there for me. There was another person I could trust."

"Other people can have someone to help you and to talk to you when you are down."

"I think that's when the new S1's should have a Mentor because they are helpful and they don't ever be rude. They help with anxiety and depression. They never stop listening to whatever you are saying. They never rush you when you are talking. They are very helpful."

"They should have the same experience like us."

- Of the 13 mentees, 6 said they would like to continue with a peer mentor.

"I would love to have another peer mentor because they are fun and they always have your back no matter what happens, or if you are not (in a) very happy mood they will always talk to you calmly and never get mad at you if you're grumpy. They are awesome and never stop being happy."

"Maybe if I got a peer mentor that cared and came for me and done the helpful stuff like helping me with my wellbeing areas."

- Mentees were asked to indicate how the peer mentoring could be improved for pupils in the future. Responses included the following:

"Maybe to make it someone who has things in common with you so you have someone to talk to."

> *"If a peer mentor says they should come at a certain day and time then they should keep their word. I think you should get a mentor to last the whole of first year.*
>
> *"We could improve how many times we go out with our peer mentor, or could have more activities to do instead of doing stuff that is not relevant."*
>
> *"Add more times a week."*
>
> *"Have it on longer."*

What are the conclusions, limitations and implications?

The number of participants in the study was small therefore making it difficult to achieve significant results and also to generalise our results. We anticipate repeating this project across different schools to increase the sample size and ensure we are achieving as representative a sample as possible.

Mentors and mentees met consistently from October until December, but final evaluation information was not gathered until June 17. The S6 pupils had prelims and exam leave during the term from January until May, which had an impact on the number and regularity of contacts between mentors and mentees, both formal and informal. Therefore, recall of how many times the pairings met, their views of their enjoyment of the activities and impact of meeting with a mentor may have changed. Final evaluation data was largely consistent with interim data but the time lapse in between finishing the project and gathering data must be taken into account when analysing results. It would have been preferable to gather this data earlier or ensure the sessions continued up to the end of the school term at which point more accurate, up to date data could be gathered.

Mentees completed the evaluation survey individually on a computer. Some of the information gathered appears to be inconsistent across factors. In order to ensure the views gathered are accurate and reflect the true opinions of the mentees, it would be helpful to provide additional support to mentees to complete the survey and ensure that they understand each question and have the opportunity to expand on ratings where appropriate.

Information relating to attainment was difficult to obtain and was insufficient to allow us to draw any conclusions about the impact such a project could have on academic performance in such a short space of time. While qualitative results highlight that mentees reported a positive impact on their attainment this cannot be triangulated. This could be monitored

through tracking reports from class teachers over a more prolonged period of time providing a more robust understanding of the interaction between the mentor relationship, enhanced wellbeing and attainment.

The data suggests that efforts to encourage more frequent sessions may yield more significant benefits, as this could increase levels of trust and would support the development of the mentor-mentee relationship. Recruiting mentors in S5 for a 2 year role might improve commitment, opportunities for training and skills development and enhance the mentor-mentee relationship. It would also allow for more effective capacity building within schools so that the system could become self-sustaining over time. The work undertaken to develop the skills of the mentors would need to be replicated in our pilot school, as the S6 pupils have now left.

A consideration for the future would be to acknowledge the roles of the mentor and mentee through an award system such as the Saltire, Caritas or Duke of Edinburgh Awards. Within the timeframe of this project, this was not possible in the pilot. It would however help to reward and potentially increase the commitment of the mentors in future projects, by making it a higher priority amongst their own competing school demands.

The mentors and mentees attended weekly meetings with the Educational Psychologist and contact out-with these times was maintained with the EP via email. The Senior Management Team and Pastoral Support Team were enthusiastic, welcoming and supportive of the project; however it would have been helpful to increase their day to day involvement. This may have ensured the project continued during a time when the EPS was unavailable to the school due to competing commitments, specifically in February during a Validated Self Evaluation of the psychological service.

A key link-person was initially identified within the school. However, due to staffing changes, this was not a role that could be prioritised within the context of the competing demands that arose for this member of staff. In future it may be of benefit to identify a member of staff who is not in a promoted post to fulfil this role. More frequent contact with, and oversight from, a member of the school staff may have helped to circumvent some of the challenges that arose.

Practical difficulties such as having a suitable location to meet were reported to impact on the smooth running of the sessions on some occasions. In addition, awareness of the project among the wider staff group was low and this, on occasions, led to challenges for the pairs.

Circumstances arose where mentees were not allowed to leave classes for sessions. These were not possible for an EP to address timeously via e-mail correspondence. These challenges will be discussed with the school to consider how to enhance the smooth running of the project in the future. There is an opportunity, for example, to consider developing the project as an extension of the nurture group support structures that exist within the school.

Pairings were created based predominantly on the knowledge of staff. However, only the high school teachers were involved in this process before they had an opportunity to build a good knowledge of the S1 pupils. As a result the quality of pairings may have been compromised. A more robust system to ensure mentors and mentees are matched effectively could have had a positive impact on the success of the project. This could be achieved by spending more time with the group as a whole to see if pairings more naturally emerge, prior to formal matching. The mentor–mentee relationship, particularly in relation to trust, appears to be a particularly relevant factor in enhancing the positive impact of a mentoring relationship. It is crucial that appropriate care and time is taken over this process.

Feedback from mentees and mentors suggest that while the activities were useful for structuring the sessions and as a starter for discussions, at times they encouraged a teacher-pupil dynamic to develop as mentors strived to complete activities or worksheets. This may have negatively impacted the relationship and as such future training should consider the role of activities to encourage discussions rather than the sole focus of the session. Increasing the involvement of mentors and mentees in developing activities may also enhance their relevance and usefulness. In addition, providing opportunities for a variety of activities including access to different school departments could enhance the overall experience of mentors and mentees. However, this requires creativity in activity scheduling and full support from the wider school staff team to utilise different departments, space and resources.

Despite these limitations, this study has identified promising initial findings about the positive impact of S6 youth mentors on the wellbeing of S1 mentees. Our results suggest that the project had the biggest impact on the wellbeing of mentees who had the most positive relationship with their mentor, specifically where they reported liking and trusting their mentor and where they felt liked by their mentor. The results also highlighted that where pairings met frequently and consistently, mentees rated the overall experience more positively.

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