

Peer mentoring: a review of the evidence

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INNOVATING & INSPIRING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Main findings

The use of peer mentoring in schools is fairly widespread, even though not all schools have a framework they publish or follow. Much of the work, to date, has focused on bullying and behaviour change (such as smoking and diet changes) but there has been an increasing focus on specific outcomes such as attendance, attainment, transition and well-being. Overall, positive outcomes are recorded; although the evidence base needs to be more quantifiable to be able to provide robust impact, as most of the impact is self-reported.

However, this is not to take away from the perceived benefits by all stakeholders (mentors, mentees, and teachers). The main benefits reported have to do with development of character skills such as leadership, confidence, and communication skills. Another important benefit can be the establishment of a more collaborative school culture and friendships which are formed through these programmes.

The programmes which have a formalised structure and include rigorous training, those which use hierarchical peer mentoring (older with younger students), and those which ensure the matching of students is carefully thought through (to align their interests and experiences) tend to be the most successful. A continuous review is also necessary to ensure that the programme does not fall on the sidelines of busy schedules. This can be a challenge for the adults who are responsible for such programmes as it requires time.

The majority of studies published involve Higher Education students, where positive outcomes are recorded. Some relevant examples are included here.

Definitions

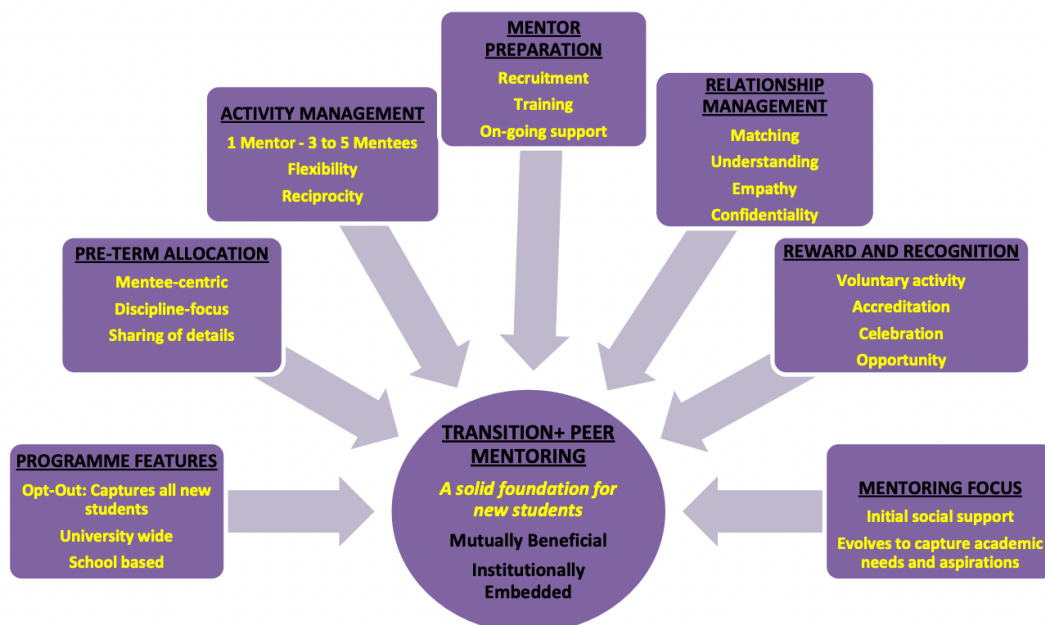
- Mentoring occurs when a senior person or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior person or student over a period of time.
- Hierarchical mentoring for students involves individuals from two different social positions, such as teacher–student, adviser–student, or counsellor–student.
- Peer mentoring describes a relationship where a more experienced student helps a less experienced student improve overall academic performance and provides advice, support, and knowledge to the mentee. Unlike hierarchical mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age and status for task and psychosocial support.

(see Collier, 2017)

Strategies for success

- Mentors need to be selected to align with the success criteria of the programme.
- Mentees should be taken from a cross section of the wider cohort to ensure there is no stigma attached with who takes part in the peer mentoring scheme.
- Peer mentoring allows for similar perspectives and experiences to be shared among mentors and mentees. This has a positive impact on mentor credibility and likelihood of following the mentor's advice (Collier, 2017).
- Peer involvement in the programme implementation and planning.
- Matches should be made as early as possible during the school year.

- There should be a consistency in the meetings between mentor and mentee.
- Social activities should be utilized and avoid a focus on just academic assistance.
- Mentors should commit for the entire school year.
- Mentor training is needed prior to matching with a mentee.
- Support for mentors and consistent communication is vital.
- Building trust and support with parents/guardians and community members.
- Continuing to keep open communication with key stakeholders of the programme (i.e. parents/guardians, administration, school staff).
- Providing ongoing training for mentors.
- Mentors allow the mentees to take some leadership by making decisions for their mentoring experience.
- Diverse groups of students of all different cultures, backgrounds, and academic and social skill levels can benefit from both being a mentor or being mentored (Crawford, 2009).
- Andrews and Clark (2011) who studied peer mentoring to help students transition to higher education suggest the below framework for successful peer mentoring:



Evidence base

Peer mentoring for skills and behaviour change

- Several studies conducted in schools show an impact on character skills and capabilities. For example, a study on emotional literacy with Y7 found a positive impact on emotional literacy competencies for those who had low to average levels at the beginning of the intervention (O'Hara, 2011); another study found a positive impact on students' self-confidence (Blegur et al, 2019); and a positive impact on communication, confidence, empathy for others, relationship building and improved self-awareness (Glazzard, et al., 2021); a positive impact on the leadership skills of mentors and a surprising decrease in altruism (Larson et al., 2020); and mentors and mentees acquiring a sense of purpose, motivation, and a sense of belonging in the school and community (San Antonio et al., 2020).

- Studies have also focused on peer support to address bullying behaviour (Roach, 2014) and reduce smoking (Audrey et al., 2006).
- Ellis et al. (2009) found the programme enhanced students' school self-concept, school citizenship, sense of self and possibility, connectedness, and resourcefulness.
- There are many studies which look at peer mentoring for health behaviour changes such as diet and lifestyle. Findings show that peer mentoring allows for the incorporation of skill-building activities; reinforcement of self-regulation activities; engagement in individual and group activities; and social support to meet personal health goals (see for example, Petosa and Smith, 2014; Campbell et al., 2008).
- Another study on prevention (YouthFriends) found statistically significant findings from community connectedness and goal setting and academic improvements (for those who had low scores at the beginning of the intervention) (Portwood, Ayers, & Kinnison, 2005).
- Working on peer mentoring to build resilience with LGBTQIA+ students Goodrich (2020) found five elements contributed to the success of their programme (a) setting the foundation for peer mentoring, (b) creating safe spaces, (c) encouraging socialization, (d) establishing leadership and identity, and (e) acknowledging intersectionality.
- Baginsky (2004) draws attention to challenges posed by such schemes and urges schools not to consider them as panacea. Moreover, they point to the need for rigorous training of the mentors as they can face challenges dealing with students with behavioural issues and other potential complex needs.

Peer mentoring for academic change

- One of the largest studies on peer mentoring (3600 matched pairs) found that those taking part found this a very positive experience but impact data (attendance, attainment, behaviour) did not provide corroborative evidence of a positive effect (Knowles & Parsons, 2009).
- There are studies which look at academic attainment and achievement as a result of peer mentoring. Daud & Shahrill (2014) found a positive impact on students' learning about differentiation in Maths; Goodrich (2018) found a positive impact on students from marginalised and underprivileged backgrounds taking part in music programmes; Johnson (2011) a positive change on rhythmic reading.

These studies point to instructional techniques of peer mentoring which can create learning opportunities for all students and allow students to provide both verbal and nonverbal input via peer mentoring.

- Peer mentoring can require a fair amount of time and organisation from teachers who might struggle to balance this commitment with their busy schedules (Johnson, 2015).
- Another study focused on transition to secondary education from feeder schools. Students in Y6 were paired up with Y9. Research found that the mentees were more confident and found the transition from KS2 to KS3 less daunting than they had imagined. The benefits to the mentors were also impressive. They became more

confident, had a greater sense of self-esteem, their communication skills were much improved and they became more responsible for their own learning (Nelson, 2003).

- It is worth noting that numerous studies suggest that the characteristics of a student's friends are related to his/her academic achievement, academic engagement, chances of finishing high school, and educational expectations (see Carbonaro & Workman, 2016 for an extensive bibliography).
- Brady et al. (2014) found that peer mentoring related to the concept of subsidiarity, where younger students asked their mentor about issues they needed help with, the 'little things' that they may feel are too trivial to bother a teacher with. Another benefit was that the relationships developed through mentoring can be sustainable and continue beyond the school boundaries.
- Willis et al. (2012) found increased engagement with literacy for those who took part in a peer mentoring programme.

Peer mentoring in Higher Education

- There are many studies in HE – where the majority of impact studies are conducted - which are looking into peer mentoring. Some of the key outcomes of peer mentoring include: personal and professional development, stress reduction, and ease of transitioning. Other studies have found a positive impact in skills and capabilities such as leadership, communication, and organizational skills; self-esteem, self-efficacy, and empowerment. The longer-term benefits are not widely studied and more research is needed to ascertain these (see for example, Scott, 2005; Budge, 2006; Hall & Jaugietis, 2010; Akinla, Hagan, & Atiomo, 2018; Kisi and Nagar, 2021).
- Seery et al. (2021) mention the potential of peer mentoring to promote a wider culture of partnership across departments and institutions.
- Page & Hanna (2008) found that academic matters that peers discussed were lecture notes, essay planning and essay writing but a lot of the discussion was also around socialising, talking about finding their way around the university campus and talking about adjusting to living away from their family home. The majority of students did not express a desire to select their own mentor and they wanted an online forum to be set up for the mentoring programme.

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Examples of peer mentoring

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Further reading

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Dr Iro Konstantinou, Tony Little Centre for
Research and Innovation in Learning (CIRL)