Peer support and mentoring systems in schools

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What is peer support?

“a range of activities and systems within which people’s potential to be helpful to one another can be fostered through appropriate training.” – Cowie & Smith (2010)

Befriending

Mediation

Mentoring
Use of peer support and mentoring

  - Primary schools - befriending and mediation
  - Secondary schools - mentoring and befriending
  - Aim to benefit: Target pupils; Peer supporters; Whole school

- Interventions
  - Academic support
  - Mental health and social-emotional support e.g. bullying
  - Part of systemic approaches
Sarah’s old friends were sending her threatening text messages...

I feel really scared and alone at school now.

What’s happening sounds serious. It needs to stop.

You’re right. I just don’t know what to do.

I can come with you to tell a teacher, and you could try joining a club to meet new friends.

I’m glad I went to the Peer Supporter. The bullying has stopped and I can have fun with my new friends.

She went to see a Peer Supporter, a pupil who was trained to help...
Pathways to impact: target pupils

Pupil users

- Directly access help – one-off or sustained support
- May be helped to access support from adults
- Positive interactions with peers

E.g. Cowie et al., 2002; Ellis et al., 2009; Smith & Watson, 2004

Peer supporters

- Experience of providing help
- Training and CV experience
- Skills development
- Positive interactions with peers and staff
Pathways to impact: whole school

**School climate**
- Promote positive citizenship
- Improve pupil-pupil and pupil-staff relationships
- Change school values
- Prevent problems escalating

**Bullying**
- Emotional support for victims
- Direct intervention – peer mediators or staff
- Fostering caring and safer school environment

E.g. Houlston & Smith, 2009; Menesini et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2001
Evidence overview

Student users:
- Majority report scheme helpful
- Largely self-report evidence but advances in certain domains

Peer supporters:
- Self-report increased social skills
- Measured advances in social/emotional development

Whole school climate:
- Teachers and pupils report safer climate
- Little evidence bullying is reduced

E.g. Cowie et al., 2002; Ellis et al., 2009; Houlston & Smith, 2009; Leung et al., 2013; Menesini et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2001; Smith & Watson, 2004
Being a peer mentor
Peer mentoring: thematic analysis

- Peer supporters gain experience and skills through challenges of role
Developing a peer support system
Longitudinal case studies

Two schools developing peer listening systems
- School 1: 18 months; School 2: 6 months
- Pastoral care and tackle bullying
- Year 10 supporters
- Year 7, 8 and 9 target users

Pupil questionnaires
(possible sample of c.360 target pupils)
- Peer support knowledge, use, and attitudes (Smith & Watson, 2004)
- Bullying experiences (ABA)
- School climate perceptions (ABA)
- School 2: Peer Supporters (Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale; SDQ; modified Conflict Tactics Scale)

Qualitative
(Smith & Watson, 2004)
- Peer supporters: focus groups
- Pupil user/non-user: interviews
- Staff co-ordinators: interviews
- Observation (informal)
Impact

**Student users**
- Low use in both schools
- Helpful for vulnerable pupils
- c.50% pupils thought was a good idea

**Peer supporters**
- Self-reported gains
  - Communication skills, peer relationships, CV experience

**Whole school climate**
- Little impact on whole school environment
- Bullying reduced in 1 school
## Implementation factors

### School One
- Low use and peer supporter frustration
- Lack of management response
- Hidden peer listening room
- Gender imbalance

### School Two
- Low use and peer supporter frustration
- Listening -> mentoring
- Unclear mentee selection
- Lack of confidentiality

- Low use -> need for adaptation
  - Need for match between aims, needs, and design
- Scope for impact limited by practical issues
  - Dedicated co-ordinators but need for management support
Supporting effective peer support
Questions to consider

- Peer support systems as interventions
  - What are the target outcome(s)?
  - How might peer support achieve change(s)?
  - How will you know if it is successful?

- Identify practical factors
  - Where and when?
  - Who will be the mentors? Who would benefit from the role?

- Monitoring and adaptation
  - How will peer mentors be supervised?
  - How will you know if it is meeting pupil needs?
Thank you for listening

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Key references:
