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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE

Big Brothers
Big Sisters

Mobilising Peer Support in Schools:
An evaluation of the BBBS school based mentoring programme

Undertaken by the
UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway

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foróige

Mobilising Peer Support in Schools:
An evaluation of the BBBS school based mentoring programme

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Please Note: *Mentors are commonly referred to as 'Bigs' and mentees are referred to as 'Littles'. The terms 'Bigs' and 'Littles' will appear occasionally throughout the report*

Executive Summary

The Big Brothers Big Sisters Youth Mentoring Programme was established by Foróige in Ireland in 2001. The programme has two strands - a community-based programme which facilitates a friendship or 'match' between a young person and an older adult in the community and a school-based programme which 'matches' young people starting secondary school with an older student in the school. The school based mentoring programme is essentially aimed at supporting the transition of young people from primary to secondary school and helping them to feel settled at school. As part of the programme, young people in their first year of secondary school are mentored by a fifth or sixth year student in the same school. Through participation in the programme, it is expected that mentees will have the opportunity to develop a supportive friendship in a safe environment, increase their confidence and self-esteem, have a positive role model in their lives and have fun. For senior students who opt to become school-based mentors, the programme offers the opportunity to undertake a voluntary leadership role within the school and provides valuable experience which can assist in their personal and professional development.

The programme was developed by Foróige over a number of years from 2003 onwards and, following a phase of rapid development in recent years, there are now 65 schools operating the programme in Ireland, spread across 14 counties. The majority of schools operating the programme support up to 30 matches each. Foróige / BBBS Project Officers work with participating schools in implementing the programme. Schools are asked to agree to the programme protocol, to provide a link teacher to liaise with BBBS staff and to support the programme by providing time and space for the matches to meet. BBBS programme staff provide training to the mentors and mentees, which covers topics such as mentoring, listening skills and child protection. Evaluations of matches are undertaken at mid-point and at the end of the academic year.

The purpose of the study is to describe the BBBS schools mentoring programme model and assess the perspectives of stakeholders regarding how well it performs its intended functions (Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004). Specifically, the aims of the study are to:

- Describe and assess the programme model

- Establish the perspective of participants / stakeholders regarding the programme outcomes and operations

- Reach a series of conclusions regarding the programmes strengths, challenges and other emerging issues

- Inform the design of future research into the programme

The study is qualitative in nature and focuses primarily on schools that are compliant with the schools based mentoring programme model. Principals and / or link teachers from 23 such schools took part in interviews. Focus groups were conducted with young people in five schools, involving separate sessions for 'littles' or first year mentees and 'bigs' or fifth year mentors. One-to-one interviews were also conducted with BBBS Project Officers and Managers. In total, 38 principals and link teachers, 50 mentees, 56 mentors and 12 Foróige staff took part in the research.

The literature in relation to school transition acknowledges that the process of transferring from primary to secondary school can be challenging for young people. The pressures faced can be academic, procedural and social and may be enhanced for those students who also experience personal or family difficulties (Akos, 2004). The transition process can last for up to a year and can have an influence on the young person's feeling of connectedness to school and can impact on their decision regarding how long to stay in school. The research recommends that schools take actions to smooth the transition of new entrants, for example by familiarising them with the organisational aspects of the new school, providing 'areas of comfort' and smaller units within the school to support bonding, facilitating peer relationships, lessening anxiety and dispelling myths (Simons, 1987; Hargreaves et al, 1996).

The literature regarding school based mentoring (also known as cross-age peer mentoring) shows evidence that such programmes can help to improve connectedness to school, facilitate peer support and improve academic outcomes for participants (Karcher, 2007). Programme structure is deemed to be of critical importance and Karcher (2007) points to the need for well-structured programmes that include mentor selection, mentor and mentee training, clear expectations, a structured approach, activities, supervision of matches, formal endings and agency support.

The findings of the primary research with young mentors and mentees taking part in the BBBS schools based programme undertaken as part of this study are presented in Chapter Two. The research explored their reasons for becoming involved in the programme, the benefits they believe it has brought and their recommendations for improvements to the programme. Mentors became involved because they saw it as an opportunity to help a first year student and identified the benefits for themselves as a sense of satisfaction from helping a younger student, perks associated with participation such as taking part in activities and having fun and the development of confidence and skills in the area of listening and communication. Mentors believe that mentees benefit from the programme in terms of having

someone older to talk to in the school, being more confident and less likely to be bullied. Some of mentors' recommended improvements to the programme were better activities, more detailed planning and enhanced assessment to ensure that people stay committed to the programme.

The majority of mentees said that, for them, having a big brother or sister means having someone older in the school to talk to and to help with any problems they may have. Mentees gave a range of reasons for their decision to take part in the programme, including that they saw it as an opportunity to meet other people, a chance to have fun and to become more familiar with the school. The main benefits identified by mentees related to the development of new friendships, having fun and the security of knowing that there is somebody there 'looking out for them'. Among the suggestions for improvements to the programme made by mentees were having better activities and more outings.

The research undertaken with principals and link teachers, presented in Chapter Three, shows that the majority of respondents introduced the programme as they had identified a need for additional supports for first year students to help them to settle into the school. The structured approach underpinning the programme was seen as attractive, particularly to schools with a pre-existing 'buddy' or mentoring system that they wanted to improve. On the whole, principals and link teachers believe that the first year students taking part in the mentoring programme feel more safe, secure and settled at school. Respondents believed that mentees gain from new friendships with their same age and older peers, feel more at ease in the school and have a better support network as a result of their participation in the programme. The programme was also seen to improve confidence and self-esteem and was considered to play a role in addressing bullying. The fact that the programme harnesses peer rather than teacher support was seen as critical to its effectiveness and was seen to complement the teacher-led forms of support offered by the schools.

Respondents also identified a range of benefits for the senior students participating, including being given greater responsibility and respect within the school. Mentors were seen to develop enhanced leadership skills and benefited in terms of being able to highlight their contribution on the CVs. The majority of respondents said that the programme has helped to create a culture of caring in the wider school community and helps in the early identification and prevention of issues affecting younger students.

The research explored the reasons why schools choose the BBBS model rather than opting to design and operate their own mentoring programmes. The responses of principals and link teachers indicate that the structured and evidence based approach of the programme is attractive to them and the fact that it is an external programme means that it is better respected by students and staff. Research respondents identified a range of challenges associated with the programme. The key challenges identified were ensuring that the 'dosage' of the programme meets the required standard – in other words that matches meet weekly for a minimum of 40 minutes - and of finding a suitable time slot in the school day for the programme. The workload associated with the programme was highlighted by an issue by some respondents and some link teachers said that they can find it difficult to maintain momentum for the

programme throughout the year. Another issue raised was that of targeting – in other words whether all first years should be included or just a smaller group, while the challenges associated with absenteeism and matches that don't 'work out' were also highlighted. All respondents described their experiences of working with Foróige / BBBS as very positive and greatly value the support and expertise that they offer through programme. All principals and link teachers said that they would recommend the programme to other schools but emphasised that it requires a strong commitment on the part of the school.

The research with BBBS Project Officers and Managers, which is the focus of Chapter Four, is concerned largely with operational issues, including exploring the reasons why many schools do not comply with the programme model. Some of the ways in which schools are not compliant with the programme model include choosing group mentoring rather than one-to one, making cross-gender matches and not offering the programme consistently every week over the course of the school year. There also appears to be variation in the levels of support offered by Project Officers in different schools and there have been challenges in moving to the partnership model that is now programme policy.

Chapters Five and Six bring together the data presented throughout the report to reach a series of conclusions about the programme. The review of literature in relation to school transition highlights that is an issue worthy of attention from a policy point of view, with schools encouraged to implement policies that will support their incoming students at this critical juncture in their education. The BBBS schools programme thus addresses a need that is deemed important from a research and policy perspective. Given that the various aspects of the programme structure, including screening, training, evaluation and supervision are associated with good practice, the programme can be considered a 'model of good practice' in cross-age peer mentoring provision.

Respondents believe that the programme is effective in relation to its desired objectives. For the purposes of the analysis, the benefits of the programme identified by respondents are divided into the more immediate or tangible outcomes and more distal outcomes that are seen to result from the primal outcomes. The primal outcomes identified by respondents for mentees include that they have an older friend and role model who has been through the school system, they get assistance with practicalities associated with the school and bullying issues may be identified and dealt with sensitively. These factors are believed to lead to the young person feeling more safe and secure at school, to feeling more confident and to having a greater connection with the school. Benefits for mentors and the wider school are also highlighted by respondents.

The added-value or 'unique selling point' of the programme is perceived to relate to its role in mobilising peer support. The findings of this study reflect research literature which point to the specific advantages of peer support models for young people. Principals and link teachers believe that peer mentors are uniquely placed to understand the 'journey travelled' by their younger peers and can effectively tailor support to their needs. They have a presence in environments that teachers may not and thus can provide support as required. 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. Young people participating in the research also referred specifically to the advantages of having an older person in the school who they can go to with issues that they would not approach a teacher about.

The research highlights that the implementation of the programme is greatly supported by two factors. Firstly, there is broad support for the programme model among stakeholders. Principals and link teachers believe that the programme model is robust and that its various features are important for the delivery of a quality programme (although it should be noted that all are drawn from schools that are compliant with the programme model). Secondly, the expertise and approach of Foróige staff in supporting schools to deliver the programme was rated very highly by principals and link teachers. There are indications that the relationships built through the schools programme have led to partnerships between schools and Foróige in relation to other programmes for young people. In terms of challenges, key issues identified include ensuring compliance to the programme model, varied intake procedures, ensuring adequate dosage and addressing the need for greater variety and structure in programme activities.

Overall, this research highlights a widespread belief among stakeholders that the BBBS school mentoring programme can make a positive contribution to the successful transition of first year students into secondary school. These findings provide a rationale for the continued operation of the programme in Ireland. Some of the issues that arise in designing an impact study of the programme are discussed in Chapter Five, while a series of recommendations are made in Chapter Six.

Big Brothers
Big Sisters

1. Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

Over the past few decades in Ireland there has been a significant change in the nature of policy for children and young people (Richardson, 2005; Kiely & Kennedy, 2005). A range of community-based services has been developed to support children, young people and families in addressing challenges and difficulties in their lives. In recognition of the importance of school and education in terms of the well-being and future prospects of young people, a range of services have been specifically designed to support young people who may experience difficulties in school settings.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters Youth Mentoring Programme was established by Foróige in Ireland in 2001. The programme has two strands - a community-based programme which facilitates a friendship or 'match' between a young person and an older adult in the community and a school-based programme which 'matches' young people starting secondary school with an older student in the school. The focus of this study is the school based programme. Separate studies have been undertaken in relation to the community based mentoring programme (see Dolan et al, 2011).

As part of the schools mentoring programme, young people in their first year of secondary school are mentored by a fifth or sixth year student in the same school. Through participation in the programme, it is expected that mentees will have the opportunity to develop a supportive friendship in a safe environment, increase their confidence and self-esteem, have a positive role model in their lives and have fun. The programme is also expected to have benefits for the mentors in the form of increased self-confidence, communication skills and the development of new friendships. The ultimate aim of the programme is to help the first year student to settle into secondary school and to stay in school for as long as possible.

Foróige / BBBS Project Officers work with participating schools in implementing the programme. Schools are asked to agree to the programme protocol, to provide a link teacher to liaise with BBBS staff and to support the programme by providing time and space for the matches to meet. BBBS programme staff

provide training to the mentors and mentees, which covers topics such as mentoring, listening skills and child protection. Evaluations of matches are undertaken at mid-point and at the end of the academic year.

Foróige has commissioned the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre to undertake research into the programme. The purpose of the study is to describe and assess the BBBS schools mentoring programme model, to describe its operations and assess the perspectives of stakeholders regarding how well it performs its intended functions (Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004). The study is formative in that the results will be used to reflect on the development of the programme and will help to guide its future direction. The research will also inform decisions regarding the design of future research into the programme. Specifically, the aims of the study are to:

- Describe and assess the programme model

- Establish the perspective of participants / stakeholders regarding the programme outcomes and operations

- Reach a series of conclusions regarding the programmes strengths, challenges and other emerging issues

- Inform the design of future research into the programme

This introductory chapter proceeds to describe the research questions and methodology for the study in greater detail. It then provides a background to Foróige, the BBBS youth mentoring programme and specifically the schools programme. A synopsis of the literature in relation to school transition, youth mentoring and school based mentoring is then provided. The chapter ends with an overview of the contents of the report.

1.2 Research Questions and Methodology

The aims of the research and the specific sub-questions for each aim are outlined in Table 1.

The research adopted the ethical stance of informed consent, doing no harm and confidentiality. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the NUI, Galway ethics committee. Copies of the consent materials are provided in Appendix 2.

The research commenced in January 2011, fieldwork took place between March and May 2011 and a draft report was completed in September 2011. The research team was greatly assisted by the staff of Foróige / BBBS, particularly the Operations Manager and Project Officers, in organising and scheduling the fieldwork. This support was invaluable in terms of enabling the research to be completed within the specified timeframe.

Table 1: Overview of research aims, questions and methods

Aim	Research questions	Methods	Findings
Describe and assess the programme model	• What does the BBBS school programme consist of? • What are its aims and objectives and desired outcomes? • Why was it established? • What are the structures and practices of the programme? • How many schools take part / numbers of young people? • How has the programme model evolved over time? • What is the key research evidence regarding school based mentoring and school transition? • Is the programme model in line with best practice in school peer mentoring?	• Review of programme manual & other relevant documents • Interview with BBBS National Manager and Operations Manager, BBBS Project Officers • Literature review	• Chapter one – description of the programme • Chapter five - analysis
Establish the perspective of participants / stakeholders regarding the programme	• Why did stakeholders choose to engage with the programme? • What outcomes are perceived to result from the programme for mentees, mentors and the wider school? • What are the views of stakeholders regarding the programme implementation? • Does the programme add value to existing practices?	• Interviews with BBBS National Manager, Operations Manager, BBBS Project Officers • Interviews with school principals and linked teachers from schools deemed to be compliant with the programme model • Focus groups with young people – mentors and mentees in a sample of compliant schools	Chapter two – young people's perspectives Chapter three – principal and link teacher perspectives Chapter four – Foróige staff perspectives
Reach a series of conclusions regarding the programme	• What is the core purpose of the programme? • What outcomes are perceived to result from the programme for mentees, mentors and the wider school? • What are the views of stakeholders regarding programme implementation? • Is the programme perceived to add value to existing practices? • What recommendations can be made to guide the future development of the programme?	• Review of all primary and secondary data	Chapter Five – analysis Chapter Six – conclusions and recommendations
Inform the design of any future research conducted in relation to the programme	• What issues arising in this research need to be considered in the design of a future impact study?	• Review of all primary and secondary data	Chapter Five – analysis

Sample selection

At the time of the study design, there were 64 schools operating the BBBS programme in Ireland. A considerable number of participating schools were not fully compliant with the programme model. The research team was faced with the dilemma of whether the study should include a sample of all schools or to focus on those schools operating with fidelity to the programme model. For the purposes of this study, a decision was made to focus resources on those schools which were broadly in compliance with the programme standards. This was done for two reasons. Firstly, it would allow an exploration of the perceived outcomes and challenges associated with the programme model when fully operational. Secondly, one of the aims of the research is to inform the design of a potential impact study. Should such a study be undertaken in the future, it is likely to focus on outcomes for participants in schools that are operating with fidelity to the programme model. Therefore, by focusing on schools compliant with the programme model, an assessment can be made of the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the programme when operating in the manner intended by Foróige. This qualitative data can be used to inform the section of quantitative measures in a future impact study. It is acknowledged that choosing this approach means that other interesting questions, such as the reasons for non-compliance and the perceived outcomes from non-compliant schools are not addressed in the research with schools. However, these questions are addressed in interviews with project staff and management.

In order to select the sample, BBBS Project Officers were asked to rate each of their schools on a scale from 1 to 5 in terms of their compliance with the BBBS schools programme model. The study sample was limited to schools ranked 4 or 5 on this scale. Of the 64 schools operating the programme, 36 were ranked as 4 or 5. Of these schools, a further five were excluded from the sample for various reasons, including the fact that the relevant Project Officer was on maternity leave or other research was taking place in the school and it was felt that a request to take part in further research would place an unfair burden on the school.

Of the 31 schools sampled, five declined to take part, leaving 26 schools who consented to participate in the study. Of these 26 schools, interviews were sought with both the principal (or vice-principal if he or she knew more about the BBBS programme) and the designated link teacher for the programme. Representatives from 23 schools took part in interviews. Attempts were made to arrange interviews with the other 3 schools but did not happen due to the person not being available for interview at the agreed time or the person could not be contacted to arrange an interview. The list of participating schools is provided in Appendix 1. 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.

In order to conduct research with young people participating in the programme, a smaller sample of five schools was selected from within the larger sample. This sub-sample was chosen purposively, with the intention of ensuring a geographical spread and achieving a mix regarding length of time the school had been operating the programme. Research was conducted in five schools, involving separate

focus groups for 'littles' or first year mentees and 'bigs' or fifth year mentors. In total, 50 mentees and 56 mentors took part in the research, as illustrated in Table 2. The schools were drawn from rural and urban areas in Ireland and had been operating the programme for between 1 and 6 years.

Table 2: Numbers of male, female and total participants in the mentor and mentee focus groups in the five participating schools.

School	Male mentors	Female mentors	Total mentors	Male mentees	Female mentees	Total mentees
School 1	5	0	5	4	0	4
School 2	1	6	7	2	8	10
School 3	5	9	14	3	5	8
School 4	8	8	16	4	9	13
School 5	8	6	14	8	7	15
Total	**27**	**29**	**56**	**21**	**29**	**50**

Fifteen Foróige / BBBS Officers, the Operations Manager and National Manager were asked to consent to participate in the research (see consent form in Appendix 3). Their role involved liaising with the research team in terms of recruiting schools to the study sample and also taking part in interviews themselves. Ten Project Officers took part in interviews, as did the National Manager and Operations Manager.

Description of methods used

Young People's Focus Groups

Following the schools agreement to allow students take part in focus groups, consent forms were sent to the link teacher and distributed among students. All participants were invited to participate and it was assumed that a reduced number would take part as not all would return consent forms. The numbers and gender breakdown of participants is outlined in Table 2.

 The focus group sessions were designed to ensure that all participants were given an opportunity to have their voices heard. It was felt that a conventional focus group format, whereby questions are asked and responses given by the group, may have meant that quieter members of the group did not participate equally or may have felt uncomfortable expressing a view that was different to other group members. Thus, the chosen format was designed to maximise individual input, while gaining the benefit of group discussion and reflection. It also had the benefit of being able to accommodate larger numbers of participants than would be the case in a conventional focus group.

Separate focus group sessions were held for bigs and littles in each school. The attendance ranged from 6 to 14 participants. Firstly, a warm-up exercise was conducted, whereby participants were asked who their big sister or little sister was and to name one thing they had in common. Five questions were then written on a flip-chart and each participant was given a post-it to write their answer on. Participants were urged to answer truthfully based on their own experience and told that there were 'no right or wrong

answers'. The post-its were collected and placed on the flip chart sheet. The facilitator then read through the answers and asked the group to discuss some of the issues raised. This format worked well in that it ensured that the views of all members of the group were captured, but also allowed an opportunity to explore what was being said in greater detail. Focus group sessions generally lasted for 25 to 45 minutes, depending on the time allocated by the school.

Principal and Link Teacher Interviews

Initial contact with schools was made by the BBBS Project Officers, who explained the nature of the study to principals and link teachers and distributed consent forms to the sampled schools. Principals were asked to give consent to their schools' participation in the study, while individual consent from both the teacher and principal was also sought. Interviews with principals and link teachers were conducted over the telephone and lasted for approximately 20 minutes. Permission was sought from respondents to record the interview and all recordings were transcribed fully.

The interview schedules for principals and link teachers is provided in Appendix 4. There tended to be convergence in the views of principals and link teachers regarding the value of the programme in the school, but each stakeholder type could provide a unique perspective as a result of their role in relation to the programme. For example, the principals could make an overall assessment of the value of the BBBS schools programme to their school, while the link teacher also provided such an assessment and could give more detail regarding operational issues associated with the programme. For the purposes of analysis, each school has been assigned a number and the views of principals and link teachers are considered together in order to give an overall sense of how the programme has been received in each of the participating schools. Particular attention is given to either the views of principals or link teachers as deemed appropriate.

Foróige Project Officers and Managers Interviews

A face-to-face joint interview was conducted with the National Manager and Operations Manager. This interview was designed to provide an understanding of the origins and development of the programme to date and to review its perceived benefits, challenges and current operations.

Due to the geographical spread of Project Officers, it was decided that telephone interviews would be more cost and time effective than face-to-face interviews. Ten BBBs Project Officers took part in telephone interviews, which lasted for an average of 30 minutes. Permission was sought to record the interview and all interviews were transcribed in full.

Documentary Analysis

Key documents relating to the programme were reviewed, including the BBBS School manual. The manual was of particular value in providing a description of the programme model.

Data Analysis

The impact of an intervention such as this is diverse and multi-faceted and by capturing diverse perspectives, an attempt is made to convey that reality in as full a way as possible (Spencer et al, 2003). The methodological stance adopted by the research team emphasises the critical importance of respondents' own interpretations of the relevant research issues and accepts that different vantage points will yield different types of understanding. The research team strived to be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of data. In interpreting the views of respondents, we adhere as closely as possible to them but acknowledge the value of synthesising and comparing accounts and of placing them in a broader context. In the analysis, we seek to show how interpretations offered by the research relate specifically to the data provided by participants.

The transcripts were read through several times to give a sense of the key issues and themes emerging. Nvivo software was then used to assist with the coding process. The data was thematically coded according to the questions for each stakeholder group. 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.

Having perspectives on the programme from the standpoints of the various stakeholder groups was very useful as it enabled triangulation to occur, whereby similar viewpoints regarding outcomes or processes were often reported (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007). Differences in perspectives were also valuable. Having the multiple perspectives in general helped to build a strong sense of the programmes strengths and weaknesses and enabled the research team to form firm conclusions and recommendations.

Having described the methodology for the study, this opening chapter now proceeds to provide some contextual information in relation to Foróige and the Big Brothers Big Sisters youth mentoring programme, before moving on to describe the schools mentoring programme model in detail.

1.3 Foróige and the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programme

Foróige is a national youth organisation which aims to involve young people consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of society. It currently engages 50,000 young people annually in Ireland in its range of clubs, projects and services. The organisation provides a comprehensive range of youth work services through the operation of Foróige clubs, local youth services, local youth development projects and youth information centres. Through this multi-pronged approach, the organisation aims to meet the developmental needs of young people in general and to focus on vulnerable young people in relation to issues arising from poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion, under-achievement at school, early school leaving, youth crime, substance abuse and family difficulties. Its approach is rooted in local communities where over 4,200 volunteers are involved in its work (Foróige, 2009).

The introduction of the BBBS youth mentoring programme to Ireland arose as a result of Foróige's work in Neighbourhood Youth Projects (NYPs) in the West of Ireland. NYPs are located in disadvantaged areas, are operated in conjunction with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and engage vulnerable young people and their families in activities to promote their social and emotional development. In the late 1990s, analysis of the work of NYPs by Foróige and the HSE indicated a need for a model to support individual work with young people. Due to Foróige's commitment to volunteering, it preferred that the individual work would have a voluntary element. One-to-one mentoring involving adult volunteers and young people seemed to be a model that would meet the identified needs and thus Foróige set about researching mentoring programmes in operation throughout the world. Of the international voluntary mentoring models reviewed, BBBS was felt to be the most impressive due to its comprehensive assessment and monitoring procedures and proven effectiveness.

Following visits by Foróige and HSE personnel to the USA to see the programme in operation and visits by BBBS leaders to Ireland, funding was secured from the HSE for an Irish pilot programme. Foróige became the host organisation in Ireland while the partnership with the HSE was maintained. BBBS Ireland (BBBSI) is an affiliated member of Big Brothers Big Sisters International[1]. The BBBSI community programme manual, completed in September 2001, adapted USA programme materials to suit the Irish context. The programme was initially run only in the West of Ireland, where the first matches were made in 2001. The core component of the BBBS community programme is a 'match' or friendship between an adult volunteer and the young person, whereby the programme supports the adult and volunteer to meet weekly for a year or more. Since it was established in Ireland almost a decade ago, the programme has expanded rapidly and has proven very popular with young people, parents and those working with young people. The BBBS community programme is now operating in 14 counties in Ireland and supports over 300 matches per annum. In addition to its community-based mentoring programme, Foróige saw the potential benefits of a school based peer mentoring programme, as described in the following section.

Background to the BBBS Schools Programme

Foróige had undertaken school mentoring as part of a school programme in North Mayo and was aware of the potential for applying the BBBS model in a school context (Canavan, 1998). The organisation was very interested in the potential of school-based mentoring and also of peer mentoring, in keeping with their interest in the development of youth leadership. BBBS staff explored the idea of piloting a schools based programme in Galway Community College, Móinín na gCiseach. Foróige, at this time, was involved with the school in a range of programmes, including a school transition project and had a good relationship with the School Completion Programme co-ordinator, who was a former Foróige employee. A pilot programme was established involving post-leaving certificate students as mentors. However, this did not prove successful as these students were absent on work experience for certain periods of the academic year. Following a review of this experience, it was decided to ask senior cycle students to act as

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[1] Big Brothers Big Sisters International was founded in 1998 with the aim of promoting and supporting the development of Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programmes operating independently in various countries.

mentors. A model of matching first year students with fifth years was piloted 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. This pilot was deemed to be a success and the schools programme was extended to a further five schools in the western region. Again the BBBS staff worked with the schools to refine the model and come up with the most appropriate set of practices. The BBBS staff then came together to devise the 'school manual', which was updated in 2010. 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.

Foróige initially worked with schools with whom it had an established relationship before moving on to advertise the programme more widely. In 2007, the BBBS programme received an investment from Atlantic Philanthropies and the One Foundation, which enabled it to significantly increase its capacity. As part of this expansion, additional Project Officers were employed and the programme now operates in 14 counties in Ireland. The number of schools operating the programme gradually increased, to reach a stage where there are now 65 schools operating the programme. Foróige sees the BBBS community programme as the core strand of BBBS and the majority of staff time is dedicated to the community programme. For this reason, there is a desire to ensure that there is at least a 60:40 ratio of community to school based matches in the programme.

In the initial phase of its development, BBBS staff were responsible for the entire running of the programme in schools, including selecting mentors and mentees, training, facilitating the weekly sessions, evaluation and awarding certificates. However, as the number of schools increased, it became apparent that this model was too resource intensive from the BBBS perspective and the organisation moved towards a partnership model, whereby schools would take responsibility for the co-ordination and running of the programme in their school, but receive support and expertise from BBBS staff to enable them to do so. It is management policy that support to all schools taking part in the programme, apart from those in their first year, will conform to the partnership model.

Figure 1 below illustrates the growth of the schools programme since its inception in 2004[2]. It has grown from a starting point of 4 schools operating the programme in 2004 to 64 schools in the 2010 / 2011 academic year. The graph illustrates the rapid expansion of the programme from 2007 onwards, since then a minimum of 12 additional schools have commenced operating the programme each year. The highest year-on-year growth was in 2010, when 18 new schools were added to the programme. Just over half of all schools offering the BBBS programme (56%) are also part of the schools completion programme.

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[2] This analysis is based on data supplied by Foróige.

Figure 1: Numbers of additional schools operating the programme from 2004 to 2010

— Number of additional schools operating programme
— Cumulative total
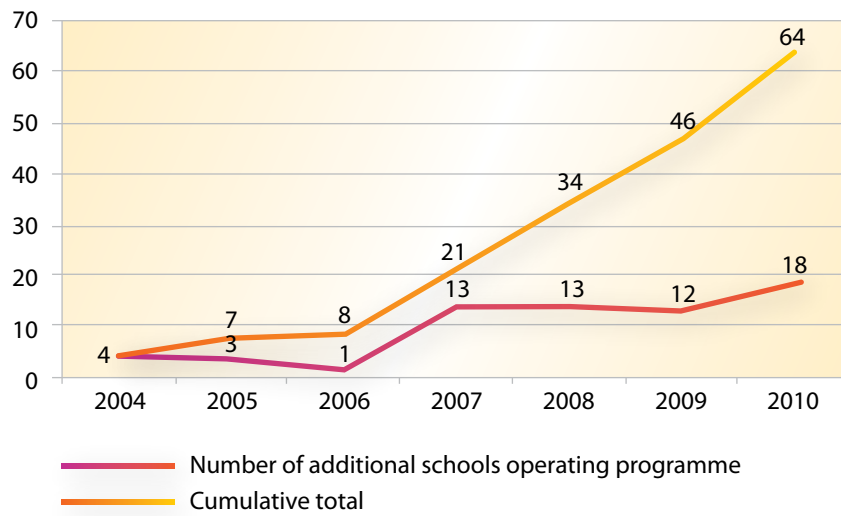
In 2010 / 2011 academic year, there were 1460 matches facilitated through the programme. The number of matches facilitated in each school ranges from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 90.

Figure 2: Numbers of matches facilitated by schools
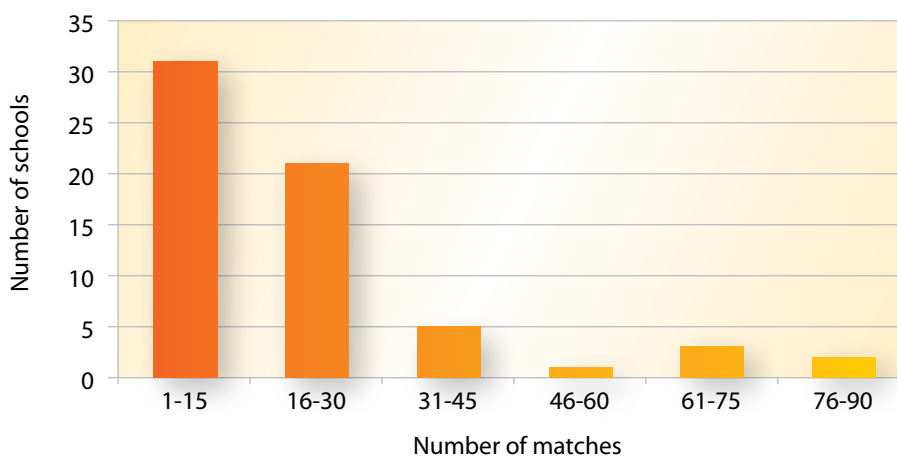
Figure 2 illustrates the number of matches per school. Just under half of all schools running the programme (48%) facilitate between 1 and 15 matches, while 33% of schools support between 16 and 30 matches as part of their programme. The number of schools supporting 31 or more matches through the programme amounts to 17 per cent of the total. This profile indicates that the majority of schools operating the programme support up to 30 matches.

1.4 Overview of the BBBS 'School' Mentoring Programme

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 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 development and to benefit the school community, in terms of creating a more supportive environment for students. According to the BBBS School Manual (2010), through their participation in the BBBS School mentoring programme, mentees will:

- Positively engage with an older student who is supportive and encouraging, in their school lives.

- Enhance communication, self-esteem and assertiveness skills through the relationship they will develop with their Big Brother / Big Sister.

- Have a positive developmental programme linked to their formal education.

- Develop a support network through which they may discuss issues of concern to them.

- Improve their attitude to education and their motivation to be engaged in education.

The manual also highlights the expected outcomes for mentors. It states that through participation in the BBBS School Mentoring Programme mentors will:

- Engage with a first year student in a supportive and encouraging role.

- Develop a greater understanding of the role of a volunteer mentor.

- Demonstrate improved communication and assertiveness skills through BBBS training and programme involvement.

- Recognise and develop opportunities to contribute positively to the school community.

- Enhance their sense of empathy and school / community awareness.

- Receive recognition through positive affirmation by school and BBBS personnel.

Figure 3 below provides an overview of the core features of the BBBS programme model, while Figure 4 outlines the programme practices in greater detail. 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. 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. The matched pairs are expected to 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. 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.

Figure 3: The BBBS Schools Programme Model: Core Features

1. Matches are of the same gender and are one-to-one. The mentees are junior cycle students and mentors are senior cycle students.

2. The programme operates from September/October of an academic year to April/May of the following year.

3. There is an identified staff person within the school that operates the programme, with support from the BBBS staff person.

4. The School facilitates the following:

    • Information, interview and training sessions for mentors and mentees prior to being matched.

    • Support, supervision and evaluation for all mentors and mentees after being matched.

    • A suitable venue, and a minimum of one class period/ lunchtime per week for matches to meet, that is supervised by a designated person.

    • Parental permission for all young people participating.

5. Activities carried out under the BBBS school programme are in accordance with BBBS/ Foróige policies, procedures and insurance.

6. The programme is operated in accordance with the BBBS school manual.

The BBBS Project Officer works with the participating schools and link teachers in his or her area. They give training to school staff and provide ongoing support over the phone. They are expected to check in with the link teacher on a regular basis to make sure that the programme is operating well and help in addressing any issues that may 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.

Figure 4: Overview of key programme elements	
Information session:	15 minutes per group Mentors and mentees separately
Mentee intake:	Application / consent Interview: 10 minutes per applicant Young people are interviewed individually In cases where too many young people apply, a questionnaire is distributed to shortlist applicants Candidates are accepted or not accepted
Mentor intake:	Application / consent / reference from a teacher Interview: 10 - 15 minutes per applicant In cases where too many young people apply, potential floaters may be identified. (Floaters are mentors that fill in for absent mentors on any given day)
Training:	Mentors and mentees are trained separately 3 hours for **mentors** (includes communication & listening, teamwork, characteristics of a good mentor, logistics of the programme, confidentiality and child protection) 1-2 hours for **mentees** (includes hopes and concerns about being a mentee, logistics of the programme, things to talk about, confidentiality)
Matching:	Matches are made on the basis of expected compatibility Mentors and mentees sign a contract agreeing to the expected commitment
Meetings:	All matches meet for a minimum of 40 minutes per week from September / October to April / May in a group setting Link teacher facilitates a group activity
Evaluation:	Participants complete match report card after every session Mid-point evaluation – focus group with mentor and mentee groups separately End-point evaluation – individual evaluation form Evaluation with BBBS Programme co-ordinator
Activity:	One activity at the end of each term – e.g. outing
Recognition event:	Organised at the end of the programme Participants, parents and staff invited Certificates awarded

To set the context for this study, a brief review of the research literature in relation to mentoring and peer mentoring in schools is now provided.

1.5 Literature review: School Transition and the Role of School-Based Mentoring Programmes

It is widely acknowledged that the transition from primary to secondary school represents a key challenge for young people (Eccles, 1999; Dryfoos, 1990). While most young people will make this transition without any significant problem, for some young people experiencing personal or family difficulties, the transition can be particularly stressful. They must cope with existing personal issues while also establishing themselves in a new school environment. It is at this juncture that some young people can fall behind their peers and become alienated from school. This disconnectedness can lead to academic and peer problems, problem behaviour and eventually to early school leaving. Irish research has clearly shown that dislike of and alienation from school contributes to the decision to leave school early (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). There are clear associations between early school leaving and socio-economic disadvantage later in life, while participation in school is considered to be a developmental asset on the basis that young people remaining in the school system are less likely to be exposed to risk factors than those who have left without qualifications (Leffert et al., 1998). Policy makers are, therefore, increasingly seeing the need for interventions designed to support young people to feel connected to and comfortable in the school environment if they are to stay in school and to succeed academically. School based mentoring programmes have been developed with the explicit purpose of supporting young people to connect with and do well in school. This part of the chapter reviews some of the literature relevant to the issues of school transition and school based mentoring.

School transition

Specific research themes within the study of school transition include why some youth seem to cope much better than others with the transition, identifying the short and long term consequences of transition difficulties and evaluating efforts to support young people in making a smooth and successful transition.

Landmark studies in the area of transition were undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s in Baltimore and Milwaukee in the US, exploring the effects of transition to school on 621 youth (Simmons and Blyth, 1987). The study drew attention to the challenges associated with moving from a small protected school environment into a much larger, more impersonal secondary school. The research highlighted that adapting from the primary or intense and intimate relationships (gemeinschaft) present in the primary school to the secondary or impersonal and specific relationships (gesellschaft) that characterise secondary school represented a fundamental challenge for young people experiencing transition (Simmons, 1987). Similarly, Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) describes how, in primary schools, the emphasis is on caring and control, while in secondary schools, there is a narrower academic focus and student polarization as a result of streaming can result in isolation and fragmentation of young people's experience.

A large body of research exists detailing the problems that arise at times of transition. Three categories of difficulties were identified by Akos (2004):

1. Academic: Difficulties with academic performance post transition, including a focus on increased homework and more challenging courses.

2. Procedural: Difficulties in getting used to the school environment, timetables, learning the new building layout and school routines. It will also include difficulties in relationships with teachers and adjusting to new disciplinary systems.

3. Social: Difficulties due to disruptions in friendship groups and making and managing new peer group relationships.

Measor and Woods (1984, p.289) studied the transfer of young English adolescents to secondary school using qualitative methodology. They found that prior to transfer there were two main aspects to pupil's concerns about transition. These were concerns about the formal aspects of the school relating to the school's goals, values and organisation but also informal aspects of the school experience, such as peer group and teen culture. Pupils were concerned about the size and physical layout of the new school, dealing with a new discipline and authority system, coping with an increased academic workload, being bullied and losing friends. Similarly, Zeedyk et al (2003) found that among pupils, parents and teachers the most frequently reported transition concerns were bullying, getting lost, and managing increased school work and peer relationships.

Tobell (2003) reviewed the transition experiences of 30 students at the end of their first year in a new school. Issues that were identified by the students included changes in their relationships throughout the year. They also struggled with teacher expectations that they would behave like adults. Students were interested in building good relationships with the teachers but found this and the overall learning experience difficult in a bigger school.

Cotterell (1986) found that there are individual differences in how the transition event is approached by an individual, and that it is their appraisal of the situation which will determine whether it is likely to be harmful or not and their options for dealing with it. He reported that having adequate information about the new school is crucial. He also stated that transition can have a disruptive effect on students, the secondary environment can be bewildering and youth can feel lacking in direction, challenge and support. Symons (1987) suggested that difficulties in the transition process occur when the transition to the new environment happens before the child is ready. It also indicates that youth who are out of step developmentally, either developing too early or too late or spending time free from adult supervision too early, can experience negative effects.

Other US researchers have explored the concept of transition problems in terms of the match between the individual and their environment. For example, Eccles et al. (1993) identified aspects of the environment that were not suitable for the developing adolescent. The developing adolescent needs independence and control over their environment, has worries about peer relationships, identity concerns and demonstrates increased cognitive development. Yet secondary schools:

'emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment at a time of heightened self-focus; they decrease decision-making and choice at a time when the desire for control is growing; they emphasize lower level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher level strategies is increasing, and they disrupt social networks at a time when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be need of close adult relationships outside of the home' (Eccles et al, 1993, p.140).

Eccles and her colleagues suggest that the 'fit' between the early adolescent and the classroom environment can therefore be poor, increasing the risk of negative motivational outcomes, especially for adolescents who are having difficulty succeeding in school academically.

Research has also explored how long the negative effects of the transition last. Murdoch (1986) reported that there are a number of stages in the process of transfer, from separation which begins early in the middle term of the last year in primary school, followed by the transition that occurs into the first year of secondary and adjustment to the status of secondary school pupil. Ward (2000) found a similar process of adjustment, noting the initial stage is focused on learning the new organization of the school and the final adjustment or consolidation phase ends when the student identifies themselves as a student of the school rather than as a newcomer. Cotterell (1986) found that the adjustment can take 12 to 18 months and that delays in achievements are evidence of this.

Transition research has also considered the role of myths in the passage from primary to secondary school. Myths usually relate to stories about what the older students do to younger students as a part of a rite of passage ritual. However the research has indicated that, apart from having a negative influence on student worries about transitions, myths have a positive role in the transition in helping prepare students for the new demands of situations they will find themselves in, and sensitizing them to the new relationships and power structures in the new setting (Murdoch, 1986). However, Hargreaves et al (1996), while agreeing that myths play a useful role and will always be part of student experiences, argue that transition support should allow for informal contacts between older and younger students and a planned transition programme should help dispel anxiety.

Efforts to Improve Transition

Hargreaves et al (1996) believes that there is a need to ensure secondary schools are supportive environments for all students and not just provide 'bolt-on' programmes for those at risk. He argues that schools should create environments where there is a community of kinship across groups within the school. Components of a successful transition programme include facilitating full involvement and communication with students, parents, teachers and friends. There are benefits in providing support regarding expectations for academic performance in secondary school and an effective communication process between primary and secondary school teachers. There is a need for a familiarization component to help students adjust to the new organizational aspects of the secondary school. The use

of a transition team with a written transition plan to co-ordinate programme efforts and a follow up evaluation of the effectiveness of transition supports is also supported. Also recommended are efforts that focus on developing a sense of community and valuing pupil involvement. There should also be clear disciplinary policies and any bullying should be effectively dealt with. Structural changes that focus on smaller classes and localized units within the larger secondary school are also recommended as a way of alleviating transition difficulties (Anderson et al, 2000; Simmons and Blyth, 1987; Akos, 2004; Cotterell, 1986; Hargreaves et al, 1996).

Simmons and Blyth (1987) found that youth appear to cope better with the transition where there is 'an area of comfort' (p.352), where the young person has an area of his life that is not subject to change during this time and therefore provides a secure base into which to retreat when coping with the transition. Having areas of comfort is related to Anderson et al's (2000) finding that students benefit from having a source of information support in the new school – for example, an older sibling already in the school. The process of assigning of older students to newer students as a support following transition is also recommended by Measor and Woods (1984) while Rhine, (2000) recommends use of older students as mentors for new college students to increase social support and guard against drop out.

Smith (1997) studied a US national sample of data to review the effectiveness of transition support programmes. In his analysis he defined programmes as full transition programmes if they involved parents, teachers and students, while partial programmes did not include all stakeholders. He found that full programmes were effective in alleviating transition difficulties, while partial programmes were not. He recommends that transition programmes should provide full comprehensive support. Types of transition included in this review were students attending classes in the new school prior to transfer, providing information to students, parents visiting the school, parents attending with the students for induction, and liaison between primary and secondary teachers.

Humphrey and Ainscow (2006) evaluated a six week school transition programme in the UK, where prospective students attended the new secondary school three days a week in the term prior to transfer. The youth who took part in the programme reported that their confidence had improved and anxieties about the transfer alleviated. The students who had taken part wanted to pass on what they had learnt to their friends who had not been in the programme. The authors concluded that there is a need for further research into the effectiveness of transition programmes in order to establish what supports work best for youth and in what contexts.

Irish School Transition Research

Having reviewed the international research and concepts involved in the study of transition to secondary school, some Irish research on the topic is now reviewed.

Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004) conducted a study into the transition process for young people moving from primary to secondary school. The study combined a national survey of all secondary

school principals with an in-depth focus on transition issues in 12 case study schools. School principals reported that a minority of youth will have problems with the transition caused due to literacy and numeracy problems, lack of family support and increased number of subjects. Case study data showed that difficulties experienced by the first years included coping with new subjects, relationships with multiple teachers and rites of passage (such as beatings of first year boys particularly in boys schools). Students with problems adjusting were more likely to be female, from a minority group or those who reported feeling less confident. Larger schools tended to be more difficult for students. On the positive side, students reported enjoying the wider experiences and greater autonomy that secondary school brought. The study estimated that one in ten students will have ongoing problems with transition, with the most common reasons listed as bullying, learning problems, immaturity and the personality of the student. Similar findings were reported by McArdle (2006).

The schools in the study reported a variety of methods to aid student transition, these included having a class tutor, student mentors, induction programmes, home school liaison officers and meetings with parents. Smyth et al (2004) found that students themselves reported that having contact with the school and information about the school prior to the transition could ease the process. The role of school climate and the nature of the interaction between the students and the teacher had an important influence on the student's attitude to school and their relationship with it.

Smyth et al (2004) conclude that the provision of a generic school preparation module for all primary schools should be considered. In particular, research should analyse the role played by student mentors, with reference to international research and best practice. Other recommendations to aid in successful transition include the need to provide extra-curricular activities, to develop a supportive informal climate and to work on curriculum continuity between primary and secondary schools. They also recommend increased use of taster programmes for primary students prior to transfer and transition activities that encourage the involvement of parents.

Naughton (2000) undertook an examination of the issues relating to the transition of Irish secondary school students. He notes that traditionally schools tend to see the problem of transition as residing in the student themselves and that this therefore 'absolves schools from responsibility, their role is simply one of management and containment' (p.128). He also concludes that:

> *'The lack of progress in resolving transition difficulties is consequential on a number of attitudes embedded in Irish educational and social thinking. These include benign popular beliefs about adolescent adjustment, increasing social competitiveness between schools and between students, the territorial defensiveness of interest groups, and the state's overly circumspect approach to initiating change. The lack of voice for students themselves and the absence from educational debate of the voices of marginalized groups ensure that the deeper issues of transition remain largely unarticulated' (Naughton, 2000, p.131).*

He proposes that programmes to support adolescents in making the transition should focus on support for the adolescent adjustment, the learning adjustment, and the organisational adjustment that is required in order to settle into the new school environment. He suggests improvements in practice to aid the successful transition of students, including addressing the limitations of an academic bound curriculum so that all abilities are encouraged and valued, improving links between primary and secondary school, using mixed ability teaching, establishing a firm but fair code of discipline, supporting opportunities for student involvement in the school to build school connectedness and continued training and support opportunities for teachers.

Youth Mentoring

Proponents of mentoring have argued that, due to the changing nature of modern society, young people's access to supportive relationships with adults in their communities is diminishing. A body of literature illustrates that young people experiencing adversity draw on the support of natural mentors, particularly at times of change and transition and that such relationships are often present in the lives of resilient young people (Philip and Hendry, 1996; Rutter, 1985; Werner and Smith, 1982). The youth mentoring model recognises that children and young people derive support from informal social ties they perceive to be authentic, confidential and meaningful and aims to provide such relationships in the context of a formal programme.

There are many forms that mentoring can take, ranging from one-to-one to peer mentoring, as described by Mentor (2005):

One-to-one mentoring: This form of mentoring involves the formation of a relationship between an adult and a young person. Typically, the requirement is that they meet weekly for a minimum of one year.

Group mentoring: Group based mentoring involves an adult forming a relationship with a group of up to four young people. The mentor commits to meet with the group regularly, the purpose of which may be for fun, teaching or specific activities. The sessions generally have some structure and are led by the mentor.

Team mentoring: This form of mentoring involves several adults mentoring a small group of young people.

Peer mentoring: In peer mentoring, a young person is supported to develop a caring relationship with another youth. Peer mentoring is most likely to occur in school environments.

Internet mentoring: Internet or e-mentoring involves a one-to-one relationship between and adult and a young person that takes place online. The pair may have some initial face to face meetings but continue to communicate via the internet at least once a week. E-mentoring relationships, which are now becoming more popular often focus on specific goals such as career or academic work.

A body of empirical research indicates that one-to-one mentoring makes a small but positive difference to young people in psychological, social and academic areas (DuBois et al., 2002; Tierney et al., 1995).

A recent randomised controlled trial (RCT) evaluation of the Irish BBBS community based programme showed significant improvements for mentees in the areas of hopefulness and perceived social support compared to young people who had not been mentored (see Dolan et al., 2011).

Mentoring in school contexts generally takes one of two forms. It can involve mentoring of students by adults in a school environment or it can involve mentoring of young people by older peers wherein both mentors and mentees are students. The BBBS schools programme involves the latter form of mentoring, which will now be discussed in greater detail.

Cross-aged peer mentoring

The mentoring of young people by older peers is described as cross-age peer mentoring, defined by Karcher as follows:

> *'Peer mentoring involves an interpersonal relationship between two youth of different ages that reflects a greater degree of hierarchical power imbalance than is typical in a friendship and in which the goal is for the older youth to promote one or more aspects of the younger youth's development' (Karcher, 2007, p.267)*

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. Meetings between mentors and mentees normally take place weekly in a classroom, after school or during lunch and last about one hour. These meetings take place for the duration of the school year. The meetings often occur within a large group, such as where 10 to 20 pairs engage in individual or group-based activities. This approach is defined by the following characteristics:

- The approach to relationship building is developmental rather than prescriptive, meaning that the focus is on helping the mentee to develop their character and sense of self, rather than imposing goals on the relationship. The aim is that the mentor and mentee will develop a friendship that will be of benefit to him or her, with any prescribed goals, be they academic or personal coming second. While these issues may arise in conversation, they are 'by-products' and not the primary purpose of the intervention.

- The programmes typically last throughout the school year or longer, meeting 20-40 times per year. Karcher suggests that they should meet for a minimum of 10 times to be considered a mentoring relationship.

- There is an age difference of at least two years separating the mentor and mentee.

Cross-age peer mentoring programmes are believed to have a number of advantages, compared to other forms of mentoring. To begin with, the older student has knowledge and experience that is directly relevant to the younger student and thus any advice or guidance that they offer is likely to be taken seriously. Miller

(2002) argues that mentees are often more amenable to receiving support from an older peer, while Powell (1997) believes that peer mentoring services can help to reduce the stigma of asking for help and show both parties how to effectively ask for and provide support. She concludes that:

> *'Peer assistance appears to be instrumental in helping disadvantaged youth improve academically and develop feelings of belonging in school. Properly matched tutors and tutees can develop positive personal bonds. Cross age tutoring in particular seems to foster bonds so that participants come to regard one another as surrogate siblings or extended family members'(Powell 1997, p.9)*

Such mentoring relationships can help younger students to settle into a new school and can act to break down barriers and form relationships between older and younger students. There is a belief that the presence of supportive networks may help prevent instances of bullying. Herrera et al (2011) point out that school based mentoring may be particularly effective in helping young people to develop social skills and to communicate with peers and teachers at school. If the mentoring relationship can impact on the young person's relationship with teachers and peers, it is possible that they will feel more settled at school and perform better academically. They also point out that participation in school based activities can increase young people's sense of belonging or connection at school and their liking for school (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Increasing connectedness to school in turn has been found to provide positive benefits. For example, Simons-Morton et al. (1999) undertook an investigation into the relationship between student-school bonding and problem behaviour at school. They found that improved student-school bonding was associated with increased school adjustment and a reduction in problem behaviour at school.

Furthermore, being assigned mentoring roles can build leadership and helping skills in older students. Cross age peer mentors develop skills and experiences that will be useful to them in their later careers (Miller, 2002). Indeed, Miller speculates that the benefits to mentors may outweigh the benefits to mentees. From a policy perspective, cross-age peer mentoring programme are not costly as they are provided within the school setting.

Are school based mentoring programmes effective?

In assessing the effectiveness of school-based mentoring programmes, it is important to distinguish between studies that have focused on peer mentoring and those that have focused on adult mentoring in a school context. The findings of both types will be reviewed here as some of the issues highlighted in the studies of adult-led school mentoring are also pertinent to school peer mentoring programmes.

There is some research evidence that cross-age peer mentoring has resulted in positive effects for mentors and mentees (Karcher 2007), though there have not been many randomised controlled trial studies. Studies have shown improvements in attitudes to and connectedness to school and peers, self-

efficacy, grades or academic achievement, social skills and reduction of behaviour problems. King (2002) also reports the benefits to both mentors and youth that can accrue from such programmes.

A consistent theme in research relating to school based mentoring, is the reduced 'dosage' of school based programmes. In other words, mentors and mentees tend to meet for less time every week and for a shorter duration than in other mentoring programmes. Herrera et al (2000) report that on average school based programmes are half the dosage of community based programmes (6 hours per month vs. 12 hours per month). This has implications for the outcomes that can be expected from such interventions as it may be the case that mentees simply don't receive enough mentoring to make a significant difference to them. The meta-analysis of 55 youth mentoring programmes undertaken by Dubois et al. (2002) showed smaller effect sizes for school based mentoring programmes than for community based models. Portwood and Ayers (2005) suggest that the timetabling constraints of the academic year and the school day may minimise the scope for frequent contact, emotional closeness and longer relationships, all of which are associated with stronger outcomes from mentoring programmes.

With regard to evaluations of school mentoring programmes involving adult mentors, Wheeler, Keller and DuBois (2010) report that three high profile evaluations of such programmes have been completed in the USA since 2008. Their meta-analysis of the findings of these three studies found evidence of favourable outcomes in six areas – reduced truancy, reported presence of a supportive non-familial adult relationship, perceived scholastic efficacy (i.e. perceptions of one's academic abilities), school related misconduct, peer support and absenteeism. The authors conclude that one year of participation in a school-based mentoring programme tends to have modest effects on these outcomes. However, as discussed in the following paragraph, the findings of the BBBS evaluation (Herrera et al., 2011) raise questions regarding whether these effects are sustained after the match ends.

Herrera et al. (2011) undertook one of the largest studies of school based mentoring, involving 1,139 young people aged 8 to 18 years participating in the Big Brothers Big Sisters USA School based mentoring programme. The youth were randomly assigned to either a treatment group, who received a mentor or to a control group, which did not receive a mentor. Outcome measures related to school related performance and attitudes, problem behaviours and social and personal well-being. Measures were collected at baseline, 9 months and 15 months. They found that in the first year of involvement in the programme, participants received 5 months of mentoring, which is typical of school based programmes because they tend to start a few months into the school year and finish before the end of the school year. After this short period of mentoring, the study showed that the group of young people who had been mentored had improved academic outcomes, albeit modest and that they were more likely to report having a 'special adult' in their lives who provided them with support. When the youth were surveyed again at 15 months post-baseline (i.e. in the autumn of the following school year), the relative improvement for mentored youth in academic performance was no longer evident, but they were still more likely to report having a special adult in their lives. No improvements were found in relation to social and personal well-being. The authors conclude that the presence of mentors in schools

can help students to improve their academic performance during the school year when matched. However, this advantage appears to 'decay' when the match ends (Herrera et al., 2011, p.357). Herrera et al. believe that there is a need for further experimental research to establish whether continuing mentoring relationships into a second or third year would result in the initial outcomes being sustained over a longer period. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America responded to the evaluation by promoting strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their programme. These include enhanced volunteer training and support, lengthening match relationships and providing agency support throughout the summer months (Wheeler et al. 2010).

In summary, therefore, the research on school based mentoring suggests that it can be effective in improving school connectedness and academic outcomes but that the improvements may not be sustained beyond involvement in the programme. Further research is required to establish whether longer mentoring relationships would result in outcomes being sustained over time.

Practices in school based mentoring programmes

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. He highlights that there is increasing evidence that cross-age peer mentoring programmes that are not adequately structured have the potential to do as much harm as good. On the other hand, adhering to good practice guidelines for such programmes can help to ensure that positive outcomes will accrue for both mentors and mentees. Based on a review of published research on such programmes, he identifies the characteristics of effective peer mentoring programmes as including the following:

Recruitment: In some schools, all first years are welcome to apply to take part in the programme, while in others particular young people are targeted for participation because it is believed that they would benefit. It is generally a good idea to include a mixed profile of mentees, to avoid stigmatising more needy young people by singling them out for participation. Research also suggests that the mentors recruited should have a strong social interest and sense of caring for others. Karcher and Lindwall (2003) found that mentors were more successful if they scored high on social interest rather than self-interest. Those with a stronger self-interest are more likely to approach the mentoring relationship as an opportunity to have fun with peers rather than with the objective of being a help to them (Karcher 2007, p.10).

Training: Research has shown that the self-efficacy of mentors, in other words their belief in their ability to do a good job as a mentor, is a predictor of the quality of the mentoring relationship (Karcher, Nakkula and Harris 2005). Initial training for mentors is critical to ensure that they have a good understanding of what it means to be a mentor and how to deal with any challenges that may arise. Follow-up training is also likely to be helpful, in terms of addressing any challenges that may have arisen as the relationship is progressing. It is also important that mentors are encouraged to adopt a developmental approach rather than seeing their role as that of tutor. It is useful to provide training to mentees regarding how best to seek out and utilise the support of the mentor.

Structure: All participants must be clear at the outset regarding what is expected in terms of commitment and attendance. The programme should provide enough structure to enable the matches to have fun and build rapport, while also allowing them some free time to talk and get to know each other. Many programmes provide an activity booklet for schools to provide ideas for fun activities for matches.

Supervision: Karcher (2007) emphasises the importance of ensuring that matches are supervised and monitored to check that mentors and mentees are turning up for meetings and that they are engaging with each other during meetings. Given that frequent attendance by mentors is critical to successful outcomes, if either party is not attending, it is important to find out why and encourage better commitment. It may be necessary to re-match a 'little' with another 'big' if a mentor is not showing up, whilst still paying due attention to the fact that the 'little' may be disappointed at the ending of their previous match. It is also important that an adult is on site at all times to supervise the matches to ensure that 'deviancy training' does not occur (Karcher 2007, p.10). This could include telling inappropriate jokes to their peers, 'slagging' and name calling, undermining the authority of teachers or encouraging risk taking behaviours.

Formal endings: As with community based matches, it is important to formally end the match and review the achievements. Many mentoring programmes celebrate and recognise the achievements of mentors and mentees and award certificates of participation. This typically forms part of the end of academic year celebrations.

School-based mentoring programmes are often provided by an outside agency and it is essential that there is good buy-in and cooperation between the school and the mentoring agency. Herrera (2004) found that agency support for school-based mentors is critical in creating strong, long-lasting mentoring relationships. The mentor's perceptions of the support available to them from the agency was a critical influence on their assessment of the success of their own mentoring relationship.

Table 3: Implications of Cross-Age Peer Mentoring on Program Practices (taken from Karcher 2007, p.21)

Practice	Implications (what)	Rationale (why)
Frequency / duration of meetings	Clear expectations for mentors and mentees regarding: Frequency of meetings Duration of meetings Duration of match Closure process	Mentor absenteeism may result in decreased mentee self-esteem and increased behaviour problems
Recruitment	Mentors: Look for youth who are caring, helpful and interested in others Mentees: Avoid recruiting only high risk youth; instead look for mixed-risk status among mentees	Mentors: These youth tend to be more committed to the program and the match. They also may be more willing to work with challenging mentees. Mentees: In groups of all high-risk youth, there is a possibility of deviancy training (reinforcement of bad behaviour by the group) Not all mentors are equipped to meet the demands of high-risk mentees
Screening	Mentors: A thorough screening process is essential. Instead of criminal background checks, programmes should use in-depth personal reference from diverse sources (e.g. teacher, employer, faith leader, coach, etc.)	Mentees may model negative behaviour of older peers
Training	Mentors: Initial and ongoing training that prepares and empowers mentors. Mentees: Training that shows mentees how to make the most of the relationship.	Research shows that relationship quality is related to: Mentors self-efficacy Mentees ability to seek support from their mentors
Supervision	Regular and frequent monitoring and support of mentors by program staff.	Youth mentors need both structure and support to set realistic goals, problem-solve and process their experience. Those who choose to work with challenging mentees need additional support to prevent negative burnout and possible negative mentor outcomes.
Activities	A curriculum or other set of structured activities that involves mentors and combines developmental and instrumental activities.	Youth mentors need structure to stay focused and engage with their mentees in activities that lead to positive mentee and mentor outcomes.

Conclusion

There is considerable scope for mentoring in school contexts, including mentoring by older peers (known as cross-age peer mentoring) and by adults from outside the school (known as school based mentoring). These programmes can produce different outcomes than community based programmes, and research indicates that outcomes tend to be more related to school connectedness and academic performance than wellbeing and family / peer relationships as are commonly outcomes from community based mentoring programmes. However, because they are generally run within the constraints of the school year and the daily timetable, a key challenge in these programmes is ensuring enough 'dosage' or mentoring hours to make a difference to mentees.

1.6 Overview of the Report

This chapter has outlined the methodology for the study, described the development of the BBBS schools programme, provided an overview of the programme model and placed the programme in the context of research literature regarding school mentoring and school transition. The report now moves on to outline the findings of the research, starting with the perspectives of young people participating in the programme in Chapter Two. Chapter Three focuses on the perspectives of principals and link teachers regarding the programme, while Chapter Four is concerned with the views of BBBS / Foróige Project Officers and Managers and is mostly focused on implementation issues. In Chapter Five, the findings from the various stakeholder groups are collated under key themes and considered in the context of the research literature. Finally, a set of conclusions and recommendations arising from the study are then outlined.

2. Young People's Perspectives

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter One, focus groups took place in five schools throughout Ireland, involving over 100 young people who had been mentors or mentees in the BBBS schools programme in 2010/2011. The purpose of this strand of the research was to assess the perspectives of programme participants regarding their reasons for taking part, whether they have benefited from participation and to explore their experiences of the processes associated with the programme. All focus groups took place in schools which are fully compliant with the BBBS programme model. This chapter outlines the key findings of this strand of the research, starting with the perspectives of mentors.

2.2 Mentors' Perspectives

There were five key questions asked as part of the research with mentors. Firstly, participants were asked why they decided to become a mentor

Reasons for becoming a mentor

The majority of participants said that they remembered how hard it was to be a first year student and welcomed the opportunity to support a young person going through this process. Some participants said that they had been a mentee in first year and had benefited from it. Others said that they had not taken part in the programme in first year, a decision they had since regretted so decided to become involved as a mentor. In schools where the programme was not operating when these students were in first year, some said that they would have valued a programme such as this in first year.

> *Because I was a 'little' in first year and I found it really helped to build my confidence and I got to know older students in the school. (Mentor, school 3)*
>
> *I was a little in first year and I thought it was good so I decided to become a mentor. (Mentor, school 5)*

> *When I was in first year there was no Big Brother Big Sister programme and I remembered how hard it is and that it might help them get more confidence and stuff. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I decided to become a mentor because I remember how scared I was in first year. (Mentor, school 4)*

Another commonly cited reason for becoming a mentor was 'to get to know a first year student'. A small number of respondents said that they are responsible people and welcomed the opportunity to 'give something back' to the school. Some people referred to the potential personal benefits, such as getting out of class, getting to go on trips and having fun. A small number of respondents said they were picked by a teacher and decided to do it. Some respondents said that they didn't have a little brother or sister so wanted to know what it was like to look out for someone younger. Another young person said that he felt it was important for a new student to 'build the right reputation' in the school and he wanted to help a first year to do so.

> *I decided to become a mentor because I was asked by (teacher) and I thought it would be a good way to contribute to the school before I leave. (Mentor, school 5)*
>
> *I decided to become a mentor because I am interested in doing social studies/sociology or child psychology after my Leaving Certificate and felt that this programme would be beneficial as it relates to the subject. I liked the thought of volunteering too. (Mentor, school 5)*
>
> *I am responsible, I like having smaller brothers than me, I enjoy volunteering, I like helping people (Mentor, school 1)*

Benefits to themselves from being a mentor

Respondents were asked to complete the question 'For me, the best thing about BBBS has been….' A range of answers were given to this question. The most common answer related to a sense of reward or feeling good about helping a younger student. There was a sense of enjoyment from getting to know younger students, being able to help them and helping them to settle into school.

> *The benefits for me from being a mentor have been getting to know the 1st first year students, being able to help them, getting together during class for activities and just for them to have someone to talk to. (Mentor, school 5)*
>
> *I found I got to know the younger students of our school, it is very rewarding as my little comes to ask me questions if she needs help. (Mentor, school 3)*

> *The benefit for me of being a mentor have been I felt good for helping a first year deal with being in secondary school. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I really enjoy being a big. I feel it has helped a first year. It has boosted their confidence which is very nice to see and I really enjoy the time I spend with my little. (Mentor, school 3)*

A number of respondents referred to the fact that they got to do activities, go on outings, get out of class and other 'perks' associated with the programme.

> *The benefits for me from being a mentor have been getting out of class, to play soccer and board games. (Mentor, school 5)*
>
> *The benefits to me from being a mentor have been that we got out early for lunch. (Mentor, school 2)*

Benefits related to personal or skills development were also frequently cited. For example, respondents spoke of how the programme had helped them to be more confident, take more responsibility, be more mature, become more caring and to develop listening skills.

> *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)*
>
> *New friend, communication, leadership skills (Mentor, school 2)*
>
> *It makes you more responsible (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I feel I have grown some confidence even by just speaking out when doing activities in our class time. (Mentor, school 5)*

A small minority of students said that they did not get a lot out of the programme.

> *Not a lot apart from a few laughs. (Mentor, school 2)*

Perceived benefits for their mentee

Respondents were asked how, if at all, they believe their 'little' or mentee has benefited from their participation in the BBBS programme. The most commonly cited answer related to their belief that the mentee benefited from having someone older to talk to if they were having a problem and their generally feeling more safe and secure in the school environment. A number of people believe that the

little gained from the fact that they had at least one person in the school, who was not a teacher, who they could go to with any issues. Many said that the younger student is less 'daunted' by the school and by older students.

In discussions, the mentors referred to how they believe that the mentee is less likely to be bullied as people are looking out for him or her and the behaviour associated with bullying is seen as unacceptable. Many of the mentors saw bullying as being a problem in the school mainly because it took place without anyone knowing about it. The mentors said that they had a responsibility (which at the start they found hard to deal with but which they got used to) to go to a teacher if they think that there is bullying going on. Asked if their mentee had actually approached them with problems, most mentors said that most of the issues they dealt with were day to day school-related issues but most felt that if something was bothering the younger student, they felt they would tell them. A small number of people gave examples of where they or a friend had approached a teacher in relation to an issue raised by their mentee.

> ....them opening up to any problems they are having and having an older person to help them to get to know the running of the school. (Mentor, school 5)
>
> That they know someone in fifth year and they can come and tell us anything. (Mentor, school 5)
>
> They have someone to talk to if they have any problems and this can be a major weight off their shoulders. (Mentor, school 4)
>
> The benefits for my little have been the reliability of having someone there for them and so they have someone to talk to if they are upset.(Mentor, school 3)
>
> They have someone to ask for advice, know they have at least one friend at school, can go to an older person but not a person of authority like a teacher or parent for help (Mentor, school 2)
>
> I think its good that she knows she has an older person in the school to go to, even if only saying hello passing in the hallway. You could say it gives a sense of security. The BBBS sessions are good craic and everyone's friendly. (Mentor, school 5)

A large number of respondents also referred to increased confidence on the part of the mentee, which they believe resulted from their getting to know more people and 'learning how to get along with people'.

> *I think he gained a bit of confidence in himself to socialise with other young kids around the school. (Mentor, school 1)*
>
> *His confidence has been boosted a lot. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I think she has become more 'open' and her confidence has increased. She seems more socially aware too, she also has made friends with other 'littles' in her year, who she might otherwise not have known. (Mentor, school 3)*

The mentees were also perceived as benefiting from the fun aspect of the programme, including various activities and trips. A small minority of respondents were of the view that the first years did not get much out of the programme.

In the discussion, respondents expressed the view that the BBBS programme makes the school a friendlier place. They said that first years would never usually talk to fifth years but that now they can just come up in the corridor and start talking. They said that they talk to their littles about gossip and how they are getting on and that it's a great way to know whats going on in the school. Asked if they would describe their little as a 'real friend', they said not really, that they don't really talk about personal issues but more about school related matters. They said that the nature of the meetings means that the relationships are more like group than one-to-one.

Is it difficult to be a mentor?

The respondents were given the statement 'being a mentor is harder than I thought' and asked if they agreed or disagreed. The vast majority disagreed with the statement, saying that they found their 'little' easy to talk to and enjoyed the experience. Many said that they had lots in common, found it fun and enjoyed getting to know him or her. Some respondents who found it easy described it as being just like meeting up with a friend.

> *Disagree – it was very informal. I met up with my little once a week for a chat, there were no complications. It was easy and enjoyable. (Mentor, school 2)*
>
> *I disagree because it is all about the relationship with your little. If you have a good one which I do it's easy to talk to them. Me and my little have become almost like sisters which is really cool. (Mentor, school 3)*
>
> *I disagree because I know my little sister well and both are in interested in the same things, sports, subjects, etc. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I disagree because I was worried I'd be matched with someone completely different to me but I was matched with someone who was basically a miniature version of me. (Mentor, school 3)*

A small number of students agreed with the statement, saying that they found it difficult to talk to their little, that it was a big responsibility to take on or that it was difficult as their little did not turn up for meetings. Some referred to the time commitment involved, which can be hard to keep if involved in other school activities. One student said that it is assumed that the mentors are confident but they may not be. Another made the point that it takes time to build up trust to a stage that the mentee would feel comfortable talking about problems. The point was also made that the facilities are not adequate for the programme and thus mentees may drop out.

> *I agree with this because you're supposed to be the more confident one to pass on some of that confidence to your little but some people aren't that confident. (Mentor, school 3)*
>
> *I agree because sometimes it's hard to make conversation. It can be hard if lunchtime activities clash on Thursdays (BBBS time) but teachers and little's are generally understanding if I can't be there. It's like you're responsible for your little. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I agree with this because you have a big responsibility as a mentor. You have to set a good example. (Mentor, school 4)*
>
> *I agree because the facilities the school had were very poor and I'm not one bit surprised that people would drop out. (Mentor, school 4)*

In the group discussion in one school, the mentors referred to the fact that the mentees drifted away from the programme as the year went on and wanted to be with their peers more than the older students. Asked how this made them feel, some said 'terrible' and 'kind of crushed', while others saw it as a sign that they didn't need them anymore which was a positive thing. Some said that they thought the first year students just got bored and didn't want to do it anymore. It was highlighted that mentors must commit to the end in order to get their certificate, whereas the mentees don't have to make the same commitment.

Recommendations

The respondents were asked how the programme could be made better. The majority of respondents across the five schools highlighted aspects of the programme structure and activities as worthy of improvement. The comments made related to the content of the weekly activities that take place as part of their meetings, to the length and timing of meetings and to the spaces in which they occur. For example, it was felt that the activities can be 'boring' and that more variety is needed. Other issues raised were not getting out of the classroom enough, whether for trips or outdoor activities and the length of time allocated being too short (often just 20 minutes per week). Some people also referred to the need for better planning of these sessions and the need for an overview of what will happen from week to week. Some people said that they were not surprised that some people dropped out as the activities were not very stimulating. For some people, the issue was that it was not varied enough to keep people

interested, whereas others made the point that the programme structure and activities did not allow them to get to know their little as well as they could have, summed up by one student that 'if you had done more different things, you would have had more bonding'.

> *I think it could be improved by adding more activities and outdoor trips with the little brothers (Mentor, school 1)*
>
> *If we took part in more group activities instead of board games I think it would give us the opportunity to meet both our friends and would have more in common. (Mentor, school 3)*
>
> *I believe BB/BS would be better if there were more team building exercises and activities. It would also be better if we went on a trip to develop our relationships with our little's outside school environment. (Mentor, school 3)*
>
> *The Big Brother/Big Sister would be better if the classes lasted longer, we did more activities together, we got to talk to our mentee more to get to know them better. (Mentee, school 4)*
>
> *If there was more time to spend with the little as lunch is quite short. (Mentee, school 4)*
>
> *We were mostly in a group so we didn't get to know anyone really personally (enjoyed being in a group though) (Mentor, school 2)*

Some respondents said that more attention should be paid to matching to ensure that the matches have things in common. Some people also said that there should be more rigorous application for mentors and mentees to make sure that those who do it are really committed. The point was also made that BBBS should start in the first week or two weeks of school when students need it most, and not up to five weeks into the school year as can be the case.

> *If it was harder for some people to get in because some people aren't serious enough about it and end up quitting or ditching their little/bigs. (Mentor, school 3)*

A minority of respondents said that the programme is fine the way it is and does not need to be changed.

The following section moves on to outline the findings of research conducted with mentees taking part in the BBBS schools mentoring programme.

2.3 Mentees Perspectives

Firstly, mentees were asked why they decided to take part in the BBBS programme. Participants said that they thought it would be good to meet other people, particularly fifth year students. Some young people said that they saw it as a chance to get out of class and / or to take part in fun activities. A number

of people mentioned that they saw it as an opportunity to make a friend who would look out for them and help them if they were in trouble or had problems. A number of people said that they saw it as a means of being more confident and becoming more familiar with the school. Some said that their brothers or sisters had done it and said it was good, while another said that his Mum told him to do it.

> *It was fun to hang around with your friends and talk to new people in it. (Mentee, school 1)*
>
> *Because I wanted to know older people in the school in case I had any worries (Mentee, school 2)*
>
> *I thought I would help with any problems I had. And I would get to know more people and be more familiar with the school. (Mentee, school 3*

What having a big brother or sister means to them

The mentees were asked to complete the sentence 'for me, having a big brother or sister means….'

In completing the statement, the majority of mentees referred to having an older friend to talk to and to go to if they had any problems. Their big brother or sister was seen as someone to go to if lonely, upset or in trouble. Some of the respondents highlighted that their mentor was different to a teacher on the basis that 'they don't just side with the teachers like another teacher would'. The fun aspect of the relationship also came through strongly in the answers, with a lot of respondents referring to their big brother or sister as someone to have fun or craic with. A number of students said meeting up with their mentor is something to look forward to.

> *Having someone to help me out in case there are any issues or I have any problems (Mentee, school 2)*
>
> *It means I have someone to rely on and to share my worries. It also means can have friends in different years (Mentee, school 3)*
>
> *Means a lot to me because she is always there for me and it's nice to know that! And I also think it is a great thing to do for anyone who has any problems with school or has anything private. (Mentee, school 3)*
>
> *Having a bit of craic with someone during class time. (Mentee, school 4)*
>
> *That I am not alone! (Mentee, school 5)*

When their answers were discussed as a group, an effort was made to tease out how close mentees feel to their big and if they would go to them if they had a problem. The relationships are seen as mostly fun and they talk about issues such as teachers, exams, school rules, friendships and interests (such as soccer

or music). The majority of young people said that they would go to their mentor if they had a problem, but approximately one in four said that they would not.

Best thing about BBBS:

The focus group participants were also asked to identify what they believed to be the 'best thing' about BBBS. The majority of responses highlighted the friendship aspect of the programme, as in making a new friend, getting to know other people from other classes and years and enjoying the company of others. Again, there was a strong sense that the BBBS programme is perceived as enjoyable and fun, with many highlighting that their BBBS was someone to 'have a laugh' with. Some drew particular attention to the supportive aspects of the friendship and knowing that they 'have someone there' to look out for them. Some mentees referred to the benefits associated with getting out of class, going on outings and doing different activities. One boy said that BBBS was a way to 'stay out of trouble'. When asked about this he said that he had been picked on in the school yard and that it was good to have BBBS to go to once a week as it was a way of avoiding such situations.

> *Making a friend that's older and can have a laugh with (Mentee, school 2)*
>
> *That there is someone older there for me because I don't have a big brother or sister (Mentee, school 2)*
>
> *If you have a great friendship with your big brother or sister and it gives you a picture of the skills and patience of a person who cares (Mentee, school 3)*
>
> *I already knew my big sis but now I know her better and also know her friends so I have loads more new older friends (Mentee, school 4)*
>
> *For me taking part in BBBS is you are going to know new people and it is fun. We play lots of games and I am happy I said yes to it. (Mentee, school 5)*

Recommendations:

As with the mentors, the mentees were asked to complete the sentence 'BBBS would be better if …' Once again, the issue of a greater variety of activities and outings was raised, though not as often as by the mentors. Again, there was a desire to move beyond the confines of the room where they have their weekly meetings and to have other options available to them. Some said that the outings would not have to be fancy and that even being allowed down town once a week with their mentor would be fun. Some recommended having more one-to-one activities.

Some respondents said it would be good if all first years could have a mentor. A number of people said they would like to spend more time meeting with their 'big' and / or to meet more often. Some said that they would prefer if it was not on at lunchtime as they miss out on their break and other activities that may be on. During the discussion in one school, it was said that some people drop out during the year because they don't want to give up their lunch break

One person recommended that the mentors be drawn from fifth year and transition year so that they would get to know people in both years. A number of people said they would like some say in who they are paired with. A minority of people said that it would be good to be asked what activities they would like to do. Some young people said that the programme is fine the way it is.

> *We had more time and if we met more often and did more things one on one (Mentee, school 2)*
>
> *It would be better if we had maybe some activities outside on a sunny day (Mentee, school 4)*
>
> *I think it works fine for me and it should stay the same, because my friendship and understanding of my big (Mentee, school 4)*

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the findings of research with young mentors and mentees taking part in the BBBS schools based programme. It has explored their reasons for becoming involved in the programme, the benefits they believe it has brought and their recommendations for improvements to the programme. Mentors primary reasons for becoming a mentor relate to their desire to help a first year student and because they saw it as an opportunity to help a first year student. They identified the benefits for themselves as a sense of satisfaction derived from feeling that they have helped a younger student, perks associated with participation such as taking part in activities and having fun and the development of confidence and skills in the area of listening and communication. Mentors believe that mentees benefit from the programme in terms of having someone older to talk to in the school, being more confident and less likely to be bullied. The majority of mentors did not find the role very challenging but a small minority said that it can be difficult to be a good mentor. Mentors felt that the programme could be improved by having better activities, more detailed planning and paying more attention assessment to ensure that people stay committed to the programme.

Mentees gave a range of reasons for their decision to take part in the programme, including that they saw it as an opportunity to meet other people, a chance to have fun and to become more familiar with the school. The majority said that, for them, having a big brother or sister means having someone older in the school to talk to and to help with any problems they may have. The main benefits identified by mentees related to the development of new friendships, having fun and the security of knowing that there is somebody there 'looking out for them'. Among the suggestions for improvements to the programme made by mentees were having better activities and more outings.

The issues raised will be discussed further in Chapter Five. The next Chapter outlines the findings of interviews with Principals and Link teachers regarding the BBBS schools programme.

3. Principal and Link Teacher Perspectives

3.1 Introduction

As part of this research study, 38 one-to-one interviews were undertaken with school principals and link teachers who are running the BBBS mentoring programme in their schools. The schools sampled are all fully or almost compliant with the programme model. This chapter outlines the key themes emerging from these interviews. It starts with findings in relation to their rationale for introducing the programme to their schools before moving on to outline the benefits that they believe the programme brings to first year students, senior students and to the wider school community. The chapter then looks at operational issues, including challenges faced in running the programme, the added-value that the programme brings compared to an in-house model and their experiences of working with Foróige / BBBS staff.

3.2 Rationale for Introducing the programme

Respondents were asked why it was decided that the BBBS schools programme would be run in their school. The majority of participating schools said that they had identified a need for additional supports for incoming first year students. Some respondents said that this demand for additional supports for students was also coming from parents, as highlighted in the following quote.

> *It was something that I was acutely aware of myself in speaking with parents and just looking at the system we had in the school, I felt that there was a void or a gap there for first years and really and truly that we needed something to fill that gap and while the curriculum itself offers plenty of opportunities for students to develop I felt it still needed that extra little bit of tweaking. (Link teacher 6)*

Some principals and teachers highlighted that their schools are very large and can be an intimidating environment for all incoming first years, but particularly those lacking in peer or familial supports in the school community. For example, children who have no older siblings in the school and children coming from small, often rural national schools who would not know other people in the school. Many respondents also spoke of the difficulties for young people facing particular risks of vulnerabilities such

as poverty, family issues or disabilities. There was a perception that their school needed to enhance its capacity to support these young people and the BBBS programme was seen as a means of doing this.

> *Children we'll say from maybe disadvantaged backgrounds benefit greatly I think because they may not have friends of their own due to maybe low self esteem or maybe their location geographically, they might be situated in an out of the way location or whatever. Even in the Celtic Tiger I think sometimes you know, children can be very disadvantaged that way as well. But it helps that way because you have older students who know the ropes and who, if they're good, if the people who apply for Big Brother Big Sister have good leadership qualities within themselves they can be amazing, you know, interactions and so on with these children and bring them on. (Link teacher 13)*

Many of the schools were approached by Foróige or BBBS and felt that the programme on offer could help to address the needs that they had identified. Some schools may not have been planning to address the issues, but on hearing about the programme from Foróige / BBBS staff, felt that it was a good idea and that their students would benefit from it. Other schools reported that they had a pre-existing relationship with Foróige, through involvement in school transition programmes and came to hear about the BBBS model from staff. A number of respondents, having identified the need for a school mentoring model, came to hear about BBBS when researching potential options and felt it was suited to the needs of the school.

A number of respondents drew attention to specific features of the BBBS model as attractive in terms of the perceived needs of their students. The most common reason for choosing the BBBS programme was associated with its structured approach, including training, matching, interviewing, weekly activities, supervision, duration and certification. Many of the schools said that they had buddy schemes or systems in place but that they were cognisant of the weaknesses of these. They felt that the BBBS schools programme had a number of advantages over these schemes.

> *I suppose I liked the fact that there was somebody helping me organise it and I suppose there was more structure to it. I had run a similar type of programme myself and I had just made it up myself and I liked when I saw this that there was more structure to the whole system. Like I had some aspect of it in my own mentoring programme but I didn't have everything so I thought well this sounds better. So that was really why. (Link teacher 10)*

A number of link teachers spoke of how they were responsible for running such schemes themselves and valued the offer of external support and resourcing to help them in doing so. For example, one link teacher described how she had been running her school's buddy system for several years but felt that she 'hadn't quite had the formula right for what would constitute an effective programme'. When approached by BBBS staff offering the programme, she felt it could be an opportunity to develop a more robust model. One principal spoke of the fact that the BBBS was based on good practice and had been 'tried and tested' so they were happy to adopt it in their school.

> *The training, the research that went into the programme, that we didn't have to reinvent the wheel. There was a perfectly good wheel coming into us and we were delighted to put it on the car. (Principal 20)*

Some respondents were attracted to the BBBS model as they saw the advantages of a peer support model. They were aware that, in certain cases, young people may be more likely to turn to a peer for support than to a teacher. A number of link teachers also referred to the fact that young people may be more likely to 'identify with' older peers seriously as they have 'been there, done that'. Thus providing a peer-support programme would help to ensure that young people could seek support in a way that they felt comfortable with. There was also an awareness that by choosing good mentors, they could act as positive role models, emphasising the value of school work and doing your best at school.

> *They're so much more confident when they know the seniors and you kind of felt that they needed something other than from their teachers. What teachers say will go in one ear and out the other but when it's from their peers they pay a lot more heed to it. (Link teacher 15)*

A number of school representatives also highlighted the fact that the one-to-one support facilitated through the programme was an important attraction for them. Many said that they had models of group support in operation, but did not have a mechanism to provide one-to-one support, which they could see the value of.

> *We thought that our first years could benefit from as much support and mentoring as possible. We already have a prefect system and we could see the benefits of that for first year students but the prefects, we have 2 prefects assigned to each class group but the idea of matching, of pairing each individual first year who opted to take part in the programme with a senior student seemed like a very good idea. That's why we entered it. (Principal 4)*

Some respondents spoke of their desire to find ways to support incoming students with practical issues which it would otherwise fall to teachers to resolve, for example, using lockers or finding their way around the school. They saw BBBS as a means of reducing the burden on teachers through facilitating a flow of support between older and younger students. A number of schools said that the BBBS programme was initiated as part of their school completion programme within the school. In these cases, the potential of the programme in terms of improving school transition for vulnerable students and improving their connectedness to school was the key rationale behind its adoption.

> *I suppose the reason why we decided that it was needed in the school is because part of our retention plan, we would have targets that we focus on, work that we need to do to try and keep boys in school and one of the things that we identified was the actual transfer procedure (Link teacher 9)*

For other respondents, the impetus for the adoption of BBBS was described in terms of its fit with their school's pastoral care strategy. These schools were cognisant of meeting the social and emotional needs of their students and many spoke of the desire to create a more caring school community, where the younger students would feel welcome and part of the school rather than fearful and intimidated. Principal 22 quoted below describes how her decision to adopt the programme came about as a consequence of the creation of a new post of responsibility. In this case, the BBBS programme was adopted on a trial basis to promote student leadership and pastoral care and was subsequently continued on an ongoing basis.

> *We wanted to create a peer mentoring system in the school where we were adopting a very positive approach towards things like anti-bullying, friendship groups and we just saw this as a good vehicle for it. (Principal 5)*
>
> *I wanted to create a community in the school of caring and the older students looking out for the younger ones, just building up more community spirit within the school. (Link teacher 10)*
>
> *It came about as a part of the development of a post of responsibility where the post included being in charge of the senior prefects and the student council and it was felt that we could do something else in the area of student leadership number one and pastoral care for students number two. And it really happened accidentally to be honest, like it wasn't as if we had this big plan. We thought we'd try it out for a year and see how it worked and it was so successful that we felt we couldn't actually do without it thereafter. (Principal 22)*

A small number of respondents also referred to their desire to promote student leadership. Across the sample, therefore, the primary motivation for adopting the programme appears to relate to meeting the needs of first year students, with benefits for older students a secondary consideration. Attention now turns to the perceptions of principals and link teachers regarding the benefits of the programme for first year students.

3.3 Perceived Benefits for First Year Students / Mentees

Principals and link teachers were asked how they feel first year students benefit from taking part in the BBBS programme. A wide range of responses were given to this question. The majority of respondents highlighted the benefits that accrue from the friendship fostered between an older and younger student. This older student can answer any queries the younger student may have and provide them with more information about the school and how it works. The consensus is that this support makes the younger student feel more at ease in the school. The relationship between the mentor and mentee can go through different phases. Link teacher 12 made the point that initially the programme is about helping the first year to settle into school but that the relationship then develops into one of fun and camaraderie. Similarly, Link teacher 6 spoke of how the relationship can become more supportive as trust develops between the two parties.

> *I suppose initially the attraction would have been to help the first years settle into the school and to have somebody that they could go to with any queries or issues that they might have in relation to aspects in the school. I find now as it goes on through the year it's more of a camaraderie thing between the first years and the transition years and it's nice and upbeat and lovely to see them interacting together. (Link teacher 12)*

> *I suppose they're doing the wee games and stuff, they form the friendships and they know then they can become more comfortable talking to the fifth years. Then they can start asking questions and stuff like that, so I suppose from the first year point of view I would say they get a tremendous amount of support, emotional support as well, you know, that type of thing. (Link teacher 6)*

A number of the respondents feel that the first year students also benefit from having the older students as role models. They believe that the younger students respect and listen to their older peers and value their advice and experience. Some teachers believe that it is important to ensure that the student mentors are people of good character who can provide appropriate guidance to their protégé.

> *They have excellent role models in the students who, the senior students who are involved in the programme. They get guidance from people who are not teachers, who are in the school system themselves and who are not that very far removed from the experience of first years and they respect their opinions and they learn from that. (Principal 13)*

> *I suppose it also builds capacity across the school then in terms of the mentees, they become more aware of what happens at transition year and we've an optional transition year so it encourages them to go that route and stay in school longer and stay in education longer. (Principal 3)*

Another key benefit commonly identified is that the programme facilitates bonding between first years themselves. In the first few weeks of the BBBS programme, they undertake a range of exercises to get to know each other better. Some teachers described it as being like a club, whereby they feel a part of the group and identify with it. While they may engage in common activities as part of their curriculum work, the BBBS activities have a specific focus on getting to know the person and developing relationships. The point was repeatedly made that the programme is seen as enjoyable and fun, which encourages people to relax and be themselves. A number of respondents said that school attendance improves on the day that BBBS is on because it is seen as a fun thing to do.

> *The whole activities thing is very socialising as well for them, that they have different activities at lunchtime and they meet together and it gets them to work in a group with other first years and so they pal up with them then and that can lead to friendships ongoing. (Principal 1)*

> *It also has a very positive atmosphere in that the type of student that gets involved at transition year level tends to be students who are involved in a lot of things and their enthusiasm and infection and positivity tends to spin off on to the first year pupils and you tend to find those students becoming much more positive as a result. (Principal 3)*

Other benefits identified by respondents are that the first year students get to know the other mentors taking part in BBBS and thus see the senior students as familiar faces. As a result, the boundaries that exist in schools between senior and junior students are not so rigid and the younger student may feel less intimidated in common areas such as corridors, the canteen, the school yard and school buses. Some link teachers also expressed the view that they got to know the young people better than they would have had the programme not been operating. Thus, the programme is perceived as broadening and deepening the support networks of participating children.

> *One of the positive set of feedback that we have got back from them is that you know, when they're not in class and when they're not at their Big Brother Big Sister club on a Wednesday they'll still mix with their mentors be it at sports, be it at games time or be it at the lunch break themselves. And I myself have witnessed them at lunch breaks sitting with the older students, something which would be totally alien to little first years in previous years to this. (Link teacher 11)*

Another benefit frequently referred to by respondents is that of increased confidence and self-esteem on the part of mentees. One respondent is of the view that their esteem is enhanced by the fact that an older student is willing to give up his or her lunchtime to spend time with them. Other principals and link teachers feel that the group activities and developing relationships support the first years to 'come out of themselves' and that involvement in BBBS and being able to talk to older students in the corridor brings a certain 'street cred'. Others gave examples of the older mentors providing encouragement and positive feedback to the younger student.

> *One lad is dyslexic and his Big Brother is very, very good to him, very kind to him and when it comes to filling in the report cards at the end of the class he's always very good and sits with him and spells the words with him. In other words he's not made feel less or belittled or anything. He is supported by the senior and the same little boy is very good at sport and the other guy always praises him, you know. So he really, really brings him on and it's a very nice trait actually, it's very nice the way it works out that way. (Link teacher 17)*
>
> *I think it's good for their confidence, I think it's good for their self esteem because they like to be sort of seen talking to the fifth years as well and it's great to have a buddy that's in fifth year. (Link teacher 6)*

A number of respondents referred to the benefits of the programme in terms of dealing with incidents associated with bullying. The first years may confide in their mentor that they are finding particular people difficult to deal with and the mentor may provide advice to them regarding how best to deal with this situation. Principals and link teachers have found that issues are sometimes brought to their attention by senior students, which may or may not be serious.

> *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)*
>
> *If there's any kind of bullying going on or anything like that, that can be identified at an early stage. (Principal 7)*
>
> *Definitely one or two of the older ones might come and say to you, there might be something going on here with such a one maybe, you could look into it. They (the first year) might tell them you know. (Link teacher 22)*

Respondents referred to particular groups of young people who they feel benefit from the programme. These include children who are the eldest in their family and do not have an older sibling in the school, children coming to the school from small national schools and who may not know anyone in the school and young people who are at risk or vulnerable.

> *Knowing that there is somebody there that they're going to meet, once a week formally but also the fact that there's a familiar face particularly for the students who are coming from smaller schools into a bigger school, to a bigger secondary school and those who we would have, we would know have greater need. (Principal 6)*
>
> *Sometimes the way they're matched is really good, they might have come from a single parent family and they have great empathy towards each other and stuff like that. It really brings out the best in them. Then you'd have the other ones that are kind of neutral, you know. But you always see the exceptional kind of circumstances; it really pays off for kids. (Link teacher 17)*

The idea that the BBBS programme provides a safe place for children was raised by a number of respondents. Some children can feel lonely at break times if they do not have an established peer group. Having the BBBS programme to go to once a week was seen as providing a safe haven for that one lunch break. It could also help to develop relationships with peers and older students to reduce the isolation felt by these students. One link teacher spoke of the difficult lives that many of their pupils lead. She believes that programmes such as BBBS create a space where relationships are prioritised and where they can talk to people.

> *Some of them live fairly chaotic lives but at least a bit of stability for the few hours a week that they're in it you know and the fact that they can talk to somebody who is in the school. (Link teacher 9)*

As a consequence of the issues just discussed, the majority of respondents referred to the young people as being happier, safer and more settled at school, of having stronger relationships with same age and older peers in the school and having a better connection to the school in general. Link teacher 4 described the BBBS programme as a safe place where relationships can be developed and that this in turn makes it easier for the support staff to identify and deal with problems. She is of the view that this has given the first year students a better sense of belonging in the school.

> *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 without pulling them out of classes or off the corridors because we're dealing with a problem. We're dealing with problems now through getting to know each other in relationships in Big Brother Big Sister where they're coming now and they're asking the question rather than we finding out 3 weeks later when the problem has become a real problem. (Link teacher 4)*
>
> *I think it really kind of helps them to set themselves up in the school and to feel as if somebody cares and to have somewhere to go and to develop a caring relationship with somebody who is older in the school. (Link teacher 7)*
>
> *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. They seem to be, I'd say it does and I'd say you know even just being able to sit around and even 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)*
>
> *It makes young people feel very safe because they feel that, very often students coming into secondary school feel oh God, the senior students you know, they're to be feared. There's a lot of mythology about that and suddenly they realise that these people actually, a lot of these people are lovely and they're like Big Brothers and Big Sisters, they're there to help them. They're there to look after them. It really works incredibly well from that point of view. (Principal 3)*

Specific advantages associated with a peer support model:

One of the unique features of the BBBS schools programme is that it mobilises peer support to meet the needs of children. The question arises therefore of what are the specific advantages 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 unique features associated with peer support can be identified. Firstly, there is a view 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 widespread 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. I found last year that that was a very good development here. (Link teacher 13)*

Secondly, many of the issues they 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)*

A third feature of peer support raised by respondents was that the peer supporter has a greater reach and is likely to be in environments where the first year student is 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 is seen as furthering the reach of their pastoral care efforts, enabling students to receive supports in the contexts of their day to day interactions, rather than formally through designated support staff. 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. In a similar vein, 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.

> *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. Who is her big sister? That's great, let's have a chat with the big sister and 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)*
>
> *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 and that it is something that, 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. The point was also made that, because a group of senior students may be trained as mentors, those who provide spontaneous support or assistance to mentees are not seen as 'goody-goodies' – it's something their peers are also conscious of doing.

> *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 and the idea has been formed in their head that they actually take the time then afterwards to. (Principal 17)*

> *There is more kind of a whole community situation. When they'd walk around the school they didn't know where to go at the start, that the senior students would say to them, are you ok, where do you want to go, I'll show you. Again this whole idea sort of building up community. So it made the first years I suppose more relaxed and feel part of the school really. (Link teacher 10)*

> *For the seniors ...their generosity I think is brought out a little bit more when they have some of their friends doing it and they're not looking over their shoulders saying 'gosh, am I being a bit of a pansy now'. (Principal 15)*

Related to the previous point, 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.

> *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 felt this was great. 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. We find that to be very positive.... So it has become more than it initially was. (Link teacher 9)*

This Chapter now moves on to outline Principal and link teachers perspectives regarding how senior students benefit from acting as peer mentors.

3.4 Benefits for Senior Students / Mentors

A range of benefits for senior students were identified by respondents. Within the schools, the role of mentor is seen as important and many respondents said that their school endeavours to emphasise the importance of the role, which helps to make sure that it is taken seriously. This increases the attractiveness of the role to younger students and there tends to be considerable demand for the role of mentor as a result.

> *They'll be given a lot of kudos in the school by other teachers, the fact that they are Big Sisters, we'd have an award ceremony and they'd all be honoured and photographs taken. If we were writing references or anything we would make a big deal out of them being a Big Sister. (Principal 13)*

Becoming a peer mentor means that students are conferred with responsibility within the school and link teachers and principals were of the view that the young people benefit greatly from being given this responsibility. They believe that it enhances their leadership skills, in that they can experience what it's like to take on a leadership role and acquire the skills that come with that, such as listening, empathising, taking action and communicating. The respondents quoted below spoke of the learning and development associated with being given responsibility to care for another student for an academic year. In addition to leadership skills, increased confidence and self-esteem were also identified as outcomes for mentors.

> *They have to be thoughtful about things and thoughtful about people's feelings … putting them in that situation where they're sort of responsible for a younger child makes them think about what teachers and adults go through as well I suppose. It just gets them thinking, gets them improving their skills in terms of communication and so on. (Principal 21)*
>
> *I think the whole thing of committing for a whole year, committing to one child, not letting them down, being there for them and that type of thing…. It's very good in terms of self development and self discipline and maybe postponing their own pleasures as it were, you know, I mean they can't be with their own peers at that time. (Link teacher 13)*
>
> *It definitely improves their confidence, you could nearly see them sit up a little bit straighter because they have a little bit of, they're empowered I suppose. (Link teacher 4)*

A number of respondents emphasised that the role requires the students to reflect on how far they have come within the school since they were first years and many spoke of the fact that students are 'giving something back' to the school. One link teacher spoke of the experience as their coming full circle from being recipients of support in first year to be providers of such support in transition year. The students are seen to empathise with a younger student and put themselves in their shoes.

> *I think again they can feel that they're actually contributing, that they're giving something back and some of them maybe would be able to, I think they have enjoyed the fact that it kind of comes full cycle, that it's kind of a closure on their experience in the school, that they've gone through first year and the transitionary years in between and as senior students now they're able to go back on the cycle and assist with the first years. … it does give them a lovely sense of closure. (Link teacher 20)*
>
> *I think for most if not all of them it is that altruistic sense of giving something back to the school (Principal 15)*

Schools look upon the BBBS programme as a way of nurturing a sense of responsibility in senior students and providing them with formal and informal opportunities to contribute to the welfare of the school community. For many students, it is their first formal experience of volunteering and some use the experience to apply for the role of prefect within the school system or other youth leadership roles. A number of principals and link teachers said, as a result of being formally given a responsible role in the school, that their students are more likely to report incidents of concern to them. Many of the respondents also expressed the view that the experience nurtures a sense of social awareness in students, in that it encourages them to see situations from the perspectives of others.

> *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)*
>
> *There's a raised awareness of social need which I think which is no bad thing and no harm for them to know about. (Link teacher 9)*
>
> *A lot of them would go ahead to be prefects in sixth year and they would do that because of the experience they've had in Big Sister Little Sister really. They learn a lot about developing relationships and I suppose really it's about the spirit of a volunteer and the relationships that they build. We ask fifth years to …design an activity and then they'll plan it, go through the whole stage and then finally they deliver it which is fantastic for them to get that experience. So yeah, so they're developing skills all the time really and I suppose they're developing their own confidence in being able to actually initiate helping somebody and just developing it in that way. (Link teacher 7)*

Many of the respondents also highlighted that the experience gained is valuable for career progression in that students have the experience of undergoing an interview and can highlight their voluntary role on their CV and in college interviews. The experience can be of particular value for those interested in a career in the caring professions. The perceived benefits for the wider school are now discussed.

3.5 Benefits for the Broader School

Interviewees were asked if the BBBS schools programme has had an influence on the overall school. A small minority of respondents felt that the programme was beneficial for those involved but did not have a wider impact in the school. However, the majority of respondents were of the view that the programme's impact could be felt in the wider school environment. The majority referred to the fact that the school has a more caring climate because this initiative helps to prioritise relationships and ensure that people are looked after. Many of the respondents spoke of a 'sense of community' or having a more caring culture in the school and their belief that, if students are happy, the overall school is healthier and functions more smoothly. Some respondents, in schools where the programme has been running for several years, said they could see how the culture of the programme has permeated the whole school, as students in all years have had experience of the programme and have come to internalise the need for caring relationships in a school environment. Principal 13 describes how he sees the benefits of the programme extend beyond those directly involved to have an impact on the overall school climate.

> *What's good for students is good for the school and I think overall it has a very positive effect in terms of building a community and the community is built on relationships between people. So the first year students feel more part of the school community, they feel more involved and the senior students feel more part of it because they're helping out and they have a position of responsibility. So it's a win-win situation. Then you have all the benefits that flow from that in terms of behaviour and involvement in school life. Students have a more positive approach to school. It's of benefit to first year students in settling in and being at ease and that inevitably has a knock on to their whole experience of school. In the academic, I can't measure this but I imagine if a first year student feels more secure and at ease in school then academically they're going to perform better as well. It's beneficial all round. (Principal 13)*
>
> *It's created a culture of care I think in the school as a whole. (Link teacher 16)*
>
> *It adds to the atmosphere around the place, this sense of community that we try to instil in them and they'd be looking out for each other and that. (Principal 21)*
>
> *I suppose our philosophy in this school is that one drop of positive is worth ten drops of negative so what you're getting is, you're getting first of all it has a hugely positive impact on the atmosphere in the school. The students tend to see it as a very supportive atmosphere where they're safe, where they can enjoy themselves, where they can express themselves. But also as an atmosphere where there are boundaries so that while you can't cross certain boundaries, nobody else can do that either. So it has a very positive atmosphere in that sense. (Principal 3)*

Two principals 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. They believe that the BBBS programme has helped to counter that culture.

Big Brothers
Big Sisters

> *There's a certain vibration that it creates within the community….. 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, the pot calling the kettle black and 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 I think. And unless you recognise it and set up social structures that actually overturn that, if you recognise it and then set about putting in positive structures, it can be very destructive and corrosive of relationships in the community you know. 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)*
>
> *I went to school here and I say like the kids now are far, far more gentle if you like with regards to their approach to each other in comparison to the way that we were when we were coming here. (Principal 17)*

The point was also made that the school 'runs more smoothly' in that issues and problems facing first year students are identified and resolved before they escalate. As a result, students can settle down and focus on their school work rather than being distracted by other issues. As such, the programme is seen to play a preventative role in that it puts supports in place that can prevent the onset of more serious problems.

> *It means that students settle in immediately when they come into school. I think myself personally if you don't get first year right and you don't get students caught in the net in the first year you're running playing catch up for the rest of their years. (Link teacher 11)*
>
> *I think it does in that it helps first years to settle in. That has a knock on effect in a lot of sort of practical things, they'd be coming out and going to their locker, that sort of thing where they're just a bit more settled and that has a knock on effect in the classes and around the school as well. (Principal 21)*
>
> *I've seen situations here in the school where things would possibly even have gone unnoticed for a longer time. Like it probably would have come to the surface but you'd know that it was actually, things had been taken into hand far earlier because of the fact that, the whole idea of the students having somebody else to come to, do you know, just that somebody who is keeping an eye out, the corner of their eye passing through the halls. (Principal 17)*
>
> *If our first years are settling in well it means that we have fewer problems down the road. It can be preventative and it can make sure maybe that some problems don't arise, you know, before they arise…….it reduces stress that might cause problems with the work in school and it also reduces the chances of them being a victim of bullying. (Link teacher 23)*

Many of the respondents highlighted that parents very much welcome the fact that the school has a mentoring system and that they have received positive feedback from parents in relation to it. They believe it is a selling point for the school for incoming first years.

> *It helps give parents a bit of peace of mind as well which is positive from a school point of view and it helps us kind of maybe build a better relationship with parents indirectly I suppose because they're appreciative of having the programme here. (Link teacher 23)*

Having reviewed the benefits of the programme identified by principals and link teachers, this chapter now moves on to explore operational issues associated with the programme, starting with an analysis of responses to the question of whether the BBBS mentoring programme brings an added-value compared to mentoring or buddy systems that could be run independently by schools.

3.6 Added value of BBBS over School-run Mentoring Programmes

Many of the schools taking part in the research had operated or continue to operate their own buddy or mentoring systems that have similar aims to the BBBS programme. Respondents were asked what, if any, the added value of the BBBS programme over a school run programme is. The majority of responses indicated that the BBBS programme brings a structured approach which can be lacking in in-house programmes. Principals and link teachers value the fact that the BBBS model is based on good practice, 'tried and tested' and comprehensive. A number of people referred specifically to the training provided to mentors and mentees, which they believe to be of a good quality.

> *That's one of the good things about it, you're not reinventing the wheel in your own school, you have a template there if you like and that it's safe and it's been tried and tested and so on. (Principal 3)*
>
> *Foróige gives very good training to both mentors and mentees and I think it's a very good training session they run with them. (Link teacher 7)*

A considerable number of respondents referred to the fact that the BBBS brand 'carries more weight' in the school than an in-house programme would and that students and staff take it more seriously as a result. There was a sense that students are more willing to give their time to it as they see it as something 'official' and they are aware that it is part of a national programme. The certificates awarded to participants at the end of the school year carries the BBBS / Foróige logo which is believed to bring added credibility to the endeavour.

> *It has maybe a little bit more, I won't say credibility but credibility is what I mean in terms of it being a regional or a national programme. You have a feeling that at the back of it is a certain amount of good research and then good, in terms of all of these things that we're supposed to comply with, that all of that has been well researched and taken into account and that we're on very safe ground there with it you know. It's a national programme, it has I suppose advertising power as well in terms of being known and trusted. (Principal 21)*
>
> *If it's an outsider, you know, it puts a bit of, I suppose, weight to the whole programme that it's not just two teachers running just another programme. (Link teacher 7)*

There was also a strong sense that buddy programmes tend to be more short lived and less intense than the BBBS programme. A number of respondents referred to the fact that school-run programmes often just endure from September to November whereas the BBBS programme is sustained throughout the school year. This longer time-frame is believed to be valuable in terms of enabling the programme to produce stronger relationships, as the following quotes illustrate.

> *…these buddy programmes…. they run out of steam very quickly. They might stay intact maybe between September and maybe November but they don't seem to have the cohesion or, it's not the commitment either but I think that Big Brother Big Sister because teachers commit for the year, I always make it clear that it's between September and May we'll say, that that's the commitment. It's not just for a few weeks. Plus as well children won't get to know an older person in a few short weeks, because you only have it for a short period every week. We have it for the lunch period and the longer that something can go on for I think the more significant that it is in their lives.(Link teacher 13)*
>
> *I suppose, if a teacher is heavily burdened with x, y or z then it might fall under the radar. With the likes of Big Brother Big Sister, because it's very clear, there are good structures in it, there's good planning and organisation, it's set up as a kind of a, it's a session every single week. There's almost an obligation to honour that every week, do you know what I mean? …So I think the more official it is and the more organisation and planning goes into it, the better.*

The respondents referred to the support available from BBBS staff and the features of the programme model as critical in ensuring that the BBBS programme does not 'run out of steam'. Firstly, the training and careful matching undertaken at the outset is believed to provide a good foundation for the programme. This is time-intensive work and schools valued having the additional resource of the BBBS Project Officer to support them with it. Secondly, BBBS matches are one-to-one which is often not the case in buddy systems and a number of respondents believe that one-to-one matches are more meaningful for students. Thirdly, link teachers in particular mentioned how important it was to have support with planning new activities to maintain the momentum from one term to the next. One teacher also highlighted that

there may be different teachers assigned to run the programme from year to year so it is valuable to have a consistent stream of external expertise there to provide training to the incoming link teachers. A number of respondents said that the students like to see the BBBS Project Officer coming in every few weeks as it is a change from the familiar teacher's face and they believe that it brings renewed energy and focus to the programme. Fourthly, principals and teachers also referred to the fact that the BBBS / Foróige staff are specialists in working with young people and bring the experience of their organisation behind them. It was felt that they have a different way of viewing young people than teachers may have and that this can be helpful.

> *In our school now the Big Brother Big Sister staff that help to run it they've been fantastic. They have games and they have quizzes and they have, they just know exercises that are appropriate and that are enjoyable as well. I couldn't imagine (doing it themselves), I really couldn't you know, with the best will in the world you know, I think the Big Brother Big Sister involvement really is the key thing. (Link teacher 12)*
>
> *The fact that you have outside expertise in training and helping and the benefit of expertise from a broader organisation is useful. (Principal 2)*
>
> *You've got people who are going to different schools training up the teachers or advising them or whatever, that's always helpful you know because it has more insight maybe into young people rather than how teachers see them, as teacher-pupil a lot of the time. (Principal 21)*
>
> *I think with the Foróige element of it, the likes of having (Project worker) on hand, she's very, very specialised within this area, has got a wealth of experience in it, I think that adds to the successful running of the process of the Big Brother Big Sister. (Link teacher 6)*

In the following section, the challenges associated with the BBBS programme, as identified by link teachers and principals are discussed.

3.7 Challenges Associated with the Programme

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. Others raised a variety of issues, that encompass the following:

Ensuring that matches meet as often as required: Some respondents said that it can be a challenge to ensure that the BBBS matches meet on a weekly basis as required. There are a number of issues that can interfere with regularity of meetings. Sports fixtures, including football or basketball matches often occur at the same time and mean that meetings cannot go ahead. At particular times of the year, there may be several weeks where BBBS cannot take place due to mentors or mentees being absent for sporting fixtures. Secondly, where transition year students are mentors, they frequently are out on work

experience or trips and are not available to meet. Where they are leaving certificate students, they may have extra study commitments. Thirdly, in recent years, many schools have been closed for extended periods due to adverse weather conditions. In such cases, the school is then under pressure to catch up with other commitments, be they academic and sports related. In these cases, the BBBS programme meeting is not held or has significantly reduced attendance.

> *This year I suppose the weather impacted greatly because we'd long spells there where they didn't meet and I think this term, we just had a meeting with (BBBS Project Officer) and we were kind of saying we haven't met in three or four weeks and it's more because we're trying to play catch up with lots of things that got cancelled prior to Christmas. So we're cramming things in now. So it is a little bit all over the place. (Principal 1)*

Time tabling: Related to the previous point, some of the respondents spoke of their difficulties in finding a suitable time slot for the programme. They found that running the programme at lunch time posed problems in that some students would not turn up or would come late, after they had eaten their lunch. Some principals and link teachers said that they resolved this issue by allocating a class time for the programme, which guaranteed full attendance. On the other hand, some respondents were reluctant to take up class time with the programme and were of the view that as a voluntary programme, it was up to students to make the commitment to attend.

Pressure on the link teacher: Some respondents highlighted the workload associated with the programme, which often falls to one teacher. While they get the support of the BBBS staff, it can be time consuming especially at the start of the year when candidates are selected, interviews done and matches made. In some schools, the link teacher seeks a commitment from other colleagues to help with the programme. In larger schools, a post of responsibility may be allocated to the programme as in the case of school 22.

> *The biggest challenge we have is the fact that we've one coordinator, that's a paid post, but she needs so much extra help. She's looking for volunteers from other staff, other staff members to volunteer.......There's a lot of work involved to the point where we actually are in the process of splitting the post for next year. So we're going to have a post of responsibility dedicated just to Big Sister Little Sister because it is so valuable. (Principal 22)*

Targeting issues: In some schools, all first years are encouraged to participate in BBBS, 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 slip through the net and they may have to make difficult decisions about who is given a place or not.

> *We'd be trying to look at them and see who needed one most. In fact there was one little one in one class and like you'd think now, academically a high flier, you would say oh she'll be fine but in fact she was the only one who cried when she didn't get a Big Sister. It is hard that way. (Link teacher 23)*

Furthermore, those who need the programme 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.

> *It is voluntary and some students, if there's a certain group of students, 1 or 2 students who don't want to become involved then some of their friends may not want to be involved either. So selling it to first year students I'd say is the most difficult bit of all, believe it or not. (Principal 13)*

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 given 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, God 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. It would be the same with our student council, you're looking at girls who may not really be high achievers, may not be very focused but you're hoping that given a certain amount of responsibility they're going to come good. So I think any mistakes that we make are probably made with our eyes wide open. And certainly the interview process is quite thorough, so I don't know how we could really avoid it. Some work out and some don't. (Principal 16)*

Maintaining energy: Some of the link teachers said that the momentum of the programme can be damaged if there has been a long period with no meeting, for example due to weather conditions or sporting fixtures. Some also said that it can be difficult to maintain commitment from students during the spring and early summer when the weather improves and they would rather be outside at lunchtime.

It was agreed that outings are valuable for bonding of participants but it can be difficult to get resources to fund such extras.

Absenteeism and matches that don't work out: 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, something that 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. The mentee's non-participation may be due to poor school attendance, which may indicate that they are facing other challenges in their lives.

> *It runs during lunchtime so they're supposed to go and get their lunch and then come back and they're allowed to go off site for their lunch so then you have the problem of some people not turning up and the other person being disappointed and then the other person who has turned up stays. I mean they join in with somebody else but they do get very disappointed, particularly the young ones if the older ones don't turn up. (Link teacher 21)*
>
> *Sometimes there are children who while you want them to be mentored and part of the programme and they sign up for it, they don't always attend but sure all you can do is give gentle pushes here and there and see if they will come back to it. In general they do but there's always the odd one. (Link teacher 1)*

The working relationship between principals and link teachers and the Foróige / BBBS staff is important. Respondents were asked how they have experienced this relationship. Their answers are discussed in the following section.

3.8 Experiences of Working with Foróige / BBBS Staff

The views expressed in relation to Foróige / BBBS staff were overwhelmingly positive. The support provided by Foróige was described as 'fantastic' and all Project Officers were described as extremely helpful, energetic, responsive and pleasant to work with. A number of respondents drew attention to the fact that the BBBS Project Officers are 'tuned in' to the pressures faced in schools and pay attention to the views of teachers, which is appreciated. The Project Officers are also seen to be able to connect very well with students, which helps in terms of their acceptance of the programme. A number of respondents also referred to the fact that they also have relationships with Foróige in other programmes, some of which have resulted from their positive experience with BBBS. A number of respondents were cognisant of the fact that, with the move to the partnership model described in Chapter One, Project Officers have less time to devote to the schools programme but still felt that the level of support was excellent. The following quotes give an indication of the responses given.

They've been very helpful. Really and truly they have. We've had numerous visits here by the staff. They're always at the end of a line …. they've been very, very helpful in even just giving us ideas in general. There is a local Foróige club here in the town itself and some of the students attend that as well so I mean as a group I really couldn't praise them enough. (Link teacher 11)

Fantastic, really, really good. Anything, any problems that I've had or any worries or concerns I've had, they also always take on board and they're really interested in what the teacher's point of view is as regards the matches within the year which is relevant you know, that's important. I think if they came in and they were just making decisions independent of what teachers thought you'd be saying well is it going to be successful because I think the knowledge the teachers and staff have about individual students is invaluable in a system like this. (Link teacher 16)

The team in Foróige are fantastic, they're great. They're a phone call away; they're an e-mail away, text message away. (Link teacher 4)

Always very positive, very professional. We have no issues at all. If we were to talk about it, it would just be in glowing terms. We have got to know more services from Foróige because of (Project Officer's) presence at the school and so we've used them for student council training as well and …. it's all very positive and very well received by everyone. (Principal 5)

Very positive and willing to listen you know, sensible and practical about what's possible in the school I suppose as well. … Yes, she has a sense of what's involved in working in schools. (Principal 1)

3.9 Would they Recommend the Programme?

Based on their experience of running the programme to date, principals and link teachers were asked if they would recommend the programme to other schools. All respondents said that they would recommend the programme. A number of respondents said that they would recommend it but would highlight to other schools that it requires a strong commitment from the school to be run successfully. The high level of support provided by Foróige was highlighted as a factor in their decision to recommend the programme.

Absolutely I can't sing the praises of the programme enough to be quite honest with you. Any help that we needed, any suggestions we needed they were always there and you never got a closed door which in times like these when money is tight, when people are tied up with numerous things it was just great to know that we'd always have somebody at the end of the line to help us if we needed the help. (Link teacher 11)

I would recommend it but I mean you have to be willing to give time to it as well; it's not something that just kind of runs by itself. You need to be committed to it as a teacher. And also, like I'm doing it on my own in this school but it would be a help if you'd a couple of teachers. (Link teacher 1)

Without hesitation. We would even be looking at other things we'd be doing and maybe saying a Big Brother Big Sister style because it works so well when we're talking about parents or volunteers or anything like that, even the community programme I would have passed on the information to anyone that was interested in getting involved with young people and saying consider this programme, it's fabulous. (Link teacher 4)

Most definitely. We have had a very positive experience from it. Now it requires a good bit of work you know. Most things in life that are worth doing require a bit of work, that's the nature of things that are good. But I would certainly recommend it, yeah. (Principal 5)

I'd strongly recommend it to other schools. (Principal 13)

3.10   Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key themes emerging from interviews with principals and link teachers operating the BBBS programme in their schools. It has looked at their rationale for choosing the programme for their school, the benefits they associate with it and the challenges they have faced regarding its delivery.

The findings have shown that the majority of respondents introduced the programme as they had identified a need for additional supports for first year students to help them to settle into the school. When approached by Foróige in relation to the programme, they felt that it represented an effective way to meet the needs they had identified. The structured approach underpinning the programme was seen as attractive, particularly to schools who had a pre-existing 'buddy' or mentoring system that they wanted to improve. The fact that it facilitated peer support was also seen as an advantage as schools had systems in place offering staff support to students and felt that this was complementary.

Principals and link teachers identified a range of benefits that they believe result from the programme. Mentees gain from new friendships with their same age and older peers, feel more at ease in the school and have a better support network as a result of their participation in the programme. The programme was also seen to improve confidence and self-esteem and was considered to play a role in addressing bullying. The general feedback from principals and link teachers is that the first year students taking part feel more safe, secure and settled at school. The fact that the programme harnesses peer rather than teacher support was seen to be particularly important.

Respondents also identified a range of benefits for the senior students participating, including being given greater responsibility and respect within the school. Mentors were seen to develop enhanced

leadership skills and to derive satisfaction and enjoyment from being able to contribute to the school. The role also beings benefits in terms of CV and career planning. The majority of respondents said that the programme has helped to create a culture of caring in the wider school community and helps in the early identification and prevention of issues affecting younger students.

Schools obviously have the option of running their own in-house mentoring programmes so their reasons for choosing BBBS instead were explored. The responses of principals and link teachers indicate that the structured and evidence based approach of the programme is attractive to them and the fact that it is an external programme means that it is better respected by students and staff. The support provided by BBBS staff and the expectations regarding duration and frequency of meeting means that it is more likely to run for the full academic year than an in-house programme which could be more easily sidetracked by other pressures on the timetable.

Research respondents identified a range of challenges associated with the programme. The key challenges identified were ensuring that the 'dosage' of the programme meets the required standard – in other words that matches meet weekly for a minimum of 40 minutes - which can be challenging due to pressure on the timetable. Related to this challenge is that of finding a suitable time slot in the school day for the programme. The workload associated with the programme was highlighted by an issue by some respondents and some link teachers said that they can find it difficult to maintain momentum for the programme throughout the year. Another issue raised was that of targeting – in other words whether all first years should be included or just a smaller group, while the challenges associated with absenteeism and matches that don't 'work out' was also highlighted. All respondents described their experiences of working with Foróige / BBBS as very positive and greatly value the support and expertise that they offer through the programme and said that they would recommend the programme to other schools. However, in recommending the programme, principals and link teachers drew attention to the fact that they would emphasise that it requires a strong commitment on the part of the school.

The issues raised in this chapter will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five. The following chapter outlines the findings of research with BBBS Project Officers and managers responsible for the delivery of the programme throughout Ireland.

4. Foróige Staff Perspectives

4.1 Introduction

Ten BBBS Project Officers took part in one-to-one telephone interviews to assess their views of the programme. Interviews were also conducted with the BBBS Operations Manager and National Manager. These interviews focused on the running and management of the programme and issues regarding implementation. The chapter starts with an examination of their views in relation to the core purpose and benefits of the programme and then identifies the issues that they see as conducive to successful running of the programme in schools. One of the roles of Project Officers is to support the school in complying with the programme model and the partnership model of working. The challenges associated with ensuring compliance in these areas are discussed in some detail. Finally, the chapter concludes with some recommendations made in relation to the programme.

4.2 Core Purpose of the Programme

Respondents were asked what they believe to be the core purpose of the BBBS schools' programme. All said that it is primarily about easing the transition from primary to secondary school and making young people feel settled at school. In the long run, it is hoped that this will make them more likely to stay in school.

> *The core purpose of the programme is really about I suppose getting the incoming first years to settle into school life at an earlier stage and to feel welcomed and thus I suppose valuing school, appreciating school, liking school. …and staying at school. I think that's the main thing, that they do make the transition and it helps them in the transition and then they will stay in school longer. I think ultimately that's really what we're trying to do. (BBBS Operations Manager)*

A number of Project Officers expressed the view that the schools' mentoring programme is a good vehicle for the identification of students who would benefit from the community mentoring programme

and that it helps with the marketing of the community based programme. The view was also expressed that young people who have volunteered in the schools' programme may go on to become mentors in the community programme.

> *I would have earmarked some students from the school programme to the community programme who are matched now and going very well. That mightn't necessarily have happened. I think that the work done in the schools can be underestimated ... (Project Officer 4)*
>
> *I think it complements the community programme very well. .. it's a good way of getting the word out, in fact we had a teacher the other day just ringing about our referral of a young person and they would have heard it through the school programme... a teacher making a referral is great.... We wouldn't normally have that for the community programme. (Project Officer 9)*

4.3 Benefits Associated with the Programme

The Project Officers were asked what they felt to be the benefits of the programme for first year students, senior students and the wider school community. The benefits cited for first year students were feeling more settled at school, developing friendships with peers and older students and having someone to 'turn to' for support if needed. They believe that students are less anxious about starting secondary school if they know they can take part in BBBS. Project Officer 1 believes that the programme is particularly valuable for students who find lunchtimes difficult as it can provide a safe place for them to go and build relationships with others.

> *For the first years, I think that the programme works extremely well when it's targeted towards those kids that find lunchtimes difficult. In any school group there are always kids that dread the lunchtime; they don't have a kind of a gang of friends. They could be the only person coming from their school, they mightn't know people and it really takes the pressure off that one lunchtime a week. It gets them to meet other people outside of their base classes as well, that there are other people doing Big Brother Big Sister. There's I suppose a confidence factor in knowing some of the older students when they're walking around the school. They can say hi, they can ask questions of the older students and they just really enjoy it. It's something that they look forward to kind of every week so I think it fills a really important gap when you have kids that aren't acting out, where you have kids that aren't causing trouble or getting suspended, on report cards. They're the really quiet ones that really struggle that are under the radar and in my opinion it's most effective when it's targeted at them. (Project Officer 1)*

Foróige staff felt that mentors gained leadership and helping skills and enjoyed being given an opportunity to contribute to the welfare of others. The point was made that the programme can really benefit young people who are not known for their academic ability but who 'blossom' when given a

mentoring role. It is also seen as good experience in terms of learning how to make job applications. Mentors also benefit from the training they receive, which raises their awareness of themselves as having a responsibility to help others and gives them the skills to do so. The view was also expressed that it is the first experience of volunteering for many and that they may be more likely to go on to volunteer in other areas as a result.

> *I suppose my experience is for the less academic students that's where they would really have blossomed in something like this whereby a teacher might say oh, in the classroom they mightn't give them a job because they're not academic… whereas kids like this who are given responsibility then do blossom you know in these kind of areas where they mightn't necessarily in the classroom…. they realise that the teacher has acknowledged them, that they are capable to doing something like this. (Project Officer 6)*
>
> *I always describe it to them as like going for a job which is quite applicable to transition year students in the sense that they have to apply, they have to get a reference, they have to attend an interview. (Project Officer 8)*
>
> *The training comes up as something that they all get an awful lot out of (Project Officer 9)*

With regard to the benefits for the wider school, the programme was seen as helping to build a better atmosphere in schools. Staff spoke of their experiences in visiting schools, feeling the atmosphere in the corridors and hearing feedback about the programme from principals and teaching staff, as described by the BBBS National Manager below. The impact on the wider school community is particularly evident in schools where the programme has been running for five years or more and all school years have had experience of it as first years.

> *I mean going to visit Cork last year now …I mean the principal spoke so highly of the programme and you just knew by him. He actually allocated class time. Most schools we do it in lunch time once a week. It was actually part of the timetable which meant that it was highly supported. And what the kids did, they kind of played games and stuff and then they made lunch together. He talked about the fact, how well adjusted people were within the school and the school atmosphere increased an awful lot. The older members felt very much part of the community. Yeah, it was actually very, very strong feedback. (BBBS National Manager)*
>
> *I think it adds to the kind of caring culture of a school, that they are interested in the welfare of the students, they're keeping an eye out, they're doing what they can to make sure everybody is supported in whatever way they need to be. .. one of my schools had a whole school evaluation done by the Department (of Education and Science) and Big Brothers Big Sisters was something they really emphasised and it was actually specifically written up in the report in the all school evaluation that they felt that the mentoring programme really added to the school. So it's something that the schools are proud of as well. (Project Officer 2)*

4.4 Factors Conducive to a Successful Programme in Schools

All Project Officers were broadly supportive of the programme model and believe that it is important to adhere to its key elements to ensure that the programme is run successfully. However, other factors in the project environment can impact on the successful delivery of the programme. Project Officers were therefore asked to identify the factors they believe are conducive to the successful running of the programme in schools. A range of factors were identified, as now discussed.

Enthusiastic and capable link teacher: The most frequently cited factor was the qualities and approach of the link teacher. There was a consensus that the link teacher should be enthusiastic about the programme and be pro-active in relation to its delivery. He or she must act as an advocate for the programme within the school, be capable of working with a back-up team of other teachers and co-ordinate adequate cover for the programme as required. The link teacher should also ensure that a varied programme of activities is on offer, to endeavour to prevent boredom or loss of interest on the part of participants. The view was also expressed that they should be present every week to ensure consistency and that they should be liked by students. Project Officers spoke of the need for link teachers to be passionate about BBBS and to 'go the extra mile' in communicating with students and staff alike to make sure that the mentoring programme runs successfully in the school.

> *I firmly put it down to a teacher who understands, grasps the programme, the concept of it, the whole idea of the one-to-one friendship.... that they need to speak to the participants individually on the corridors, chat to them, remind them, check in with them on a regular basis, all that stuff, that's not maybe mentioned in the manual. (BBBS Project Officer 10)*
>
> *Definitely the success or the failure of the programme in the school is the link teacher. If the link teacher isn't behind you or isn't supportive or encouraging or promoting the programme it really doesn't work….. I have a school and they're running it for the last 3 years and they're a headache every single year. The link teacher, if he's not going to be there he wouldn't arrange, he wouldn't be assertive enough, he wouldn't arrange for somebody else to be there, he'd just cancel it… it would be very fragmented the way it's run. (Project Officer 3)*

Buy-in from the school: The second critical issue identified by respondents was the attitude of the school principal and the school in general to the programme. Some schools place great value on the programme and are willing to allocate the time and resources to ensure it is properly run. In these schools, the link teacher is supported in his or her role and has a designated back-up team, who are also committed. The necessary facilities, structures and messages about the programme are in place to ensure that it is accorded a high priority. These schools also hold their mentors in high regard and believe in the importance of supporting them and acknowledging their efforts. Such schools are generally less reliant on the BBBS staff.

> *I can see it working well in all schools but the main thing is that they need to be open to it. And they need to be willing to be putting in the work that and not expect that this is a mentoring programme, come on in, just get it done, over with, right, fair enough, that's it. They need to commit to it. (Project Officer 7)*
>
> *Some schools are brilliant. You need a really enthusiastic link teacher and also a support team to support that link teacher and that requires I suppose having people that are interested and willing to give up their time. ....If you've got a handful of people who are interested and dedicated to it, it runs much smoother than it does in a school where you've got one person under pressure who is told to take it on board and they don't have the back up support behind them. (Project Officer 1)*

Project Officers spoke of their experiences of running the programme successfully in schools where these factors were evident and believe that the outcomes for children from the programme are greater when these resources are in place. Many of the Project Officers have had experience of running the programme in schools where the school was not prepared to or unable to allocate the time and resources to it, which often resulted in their finding it difficult to comply with the desired BBBS schools programme model. Project Officer 6 quoted below believes that its better not to run the programme in schools that don't 'buy-in' to the effort involved as it is unlikely to be successful.

> *I don't think it's for every school.....because some schools just either don't have the resources or don't think that that much effort needs to be put into it. And you're wasting your time then really trying to convince them otherwise because like I would have done, met with lots of different principals throughout the years and some of them are just fascinated by it and just want it and then others are kind of saying it's just way too much hard work to be doing interviews and to be training teachers. But I think that that's better, I think it makes for a more successful programme with a good name. (Project Officer 6)*

The view was also expressed that the programme is not suited to every school. For example, one Project Worker spoke of a school where there was a high level of social need, which resulted in a very poor attendance and significant behavioural problems in the school. The needs of senior students were such that they did not have the capacity to act as strong mentors.

Targeted rather than Universal Provision: Some schools like to offer all first year students a mentor, in the belief that they all would benefit from having a mentor. Project Officers could see the merit in this view but the concern was expressed that quality can be compromised in such cases for a number of reasons. Firstly, where schools are large, it takes a significant amount of time and resources to deal with applications, interviews and matching. Several classrooms would be needed for meetings and a large team of facilitators required to oversee the programme. There was a general consensus among BBBS

staff that it is better to run the programme on a smaller scale, thus ensuring that the available resources can be used to deliver a more intensive quality programme to a smaller number of students. In such cases, the most needy students can be targeted as well as those with less obvious needs in order to ensure that no stigma attaches to participation in the programme. For example, Project Officer 1 spoke of the pressure on resources associated with processing all first year applicants in a large school.

> *Even in the induction process for example there was like 145 first years and you couldn't interview 145 first years and a 145 mentors face to face so the interviewing process was minimised down to one page that they filled in themselves. So while you're still getting the information you're not meeting the person and getting the personality. So I do think quality does suffer. You're better off having a small group of people who apply that are genuinely interested than doing it as just a generic thing. (Project Officer 1)*

A second concern regarding the universal approach relates to the quality of mentors. Project Officers view the quality of mentors as critical to successful outcomes. Where a universal approach is taken in a school, it may mean that senior students unsuited to a mentoring role are chosen to 'make up the numbers' required. Smaller mentoring programmes mean that good quality mentors can be selected from a larger pool of interested applicants.

> *I always encourage the school to make it like an open competition for the 4th years, to kind of keep the programme smallish, like I think 10 to 12 matches is probably right so that you can at least still pick the mentors who you think would be suitable. I do think that's important because the quality of the mentor group really affects the matches. I've had schools where it's gone brilliantly one year and it's been a bit of a struggle the next year. It does depend on the quality of the mentor group a lot. (Project Officer 9)*

Thirdly, the point was made that the programme should be targeted at those who demonstrate a need for the programme and who voluntarily apply to participate. The view was expressed that where all students are encouraged to participate, there is likely to be higher dropout rate as they either don't need the programme or may not have a strong desire to take part. Project Officer 3, quoted below, also made the point that children with higher levels of need are much more likely to stay with the programme if they have a strong and capable mentor, and these are the young people who need it most.

> *Not all first year students need the programme. In some of the schools they do say oh well there's 50 coming in, do the whole 50 of them. I have that situation with one school that are talking about starting it up in September. I know before it even starts there'll be a big drop out before Christmas. Unless it's a voluntary thing or they do need it, you know, they do drop out. (Project Officer 4)*

> *You do need to be quite careful about how you match a student about whom there are concerns already. If the match isn't good they definitely won't turn up and it will be erratic or they'll turn up for a couple of weeks or end of year trip and that'll be it. But I do find if they're matched up with a good strong senior … they will definitely come along. You do need to have a very good senior student to match them up to. (Project Officer 3)*

A fourth issue identified is that schools involving larger numbers of students may often deviate from the one-to-one aspect of the programme model - matching two or more first year students to one mentor, because they may not have enough senior cycle students for all the first year applicants. This is considered undesirable by Project Officers as they believe the intensity of the intervention is reduced.

In general, while Project Officers considered a targeted programme to be preferable to a universal one, it was acknowledged that some needy children may 'slip through the net' and not be included in the programme. This may be because they choose not to apply, because their parents don't want them to take part or because they are not successful in getting a place. The point was also made that some schools target all first year students and run the programme very successfully because they are willing to put the time and effort into it. There appears to be a willingness on the part of Project Officers to work with the school on their preferred way of targeting. Generally it appears that schools learn from their mistakes and change the programme as they see fit for the following year.

Timing of the BBBS meetings: There was some divergence in views between Project Officers regarding the best time for the BBBS meetings. While most schools hold the BBBS meetings at lunchtime, this can cause difficulties in terms of participants not turning up or being late, especially in schools where students are permitted to leave the school grounds at lunchtime. Some were of the view that it is preferable if a class can be allocated from within the timetable for matches to meet as it ensures full attendance. Others felt that the programme is voluntary and that incorporating it into class time would make it lose some of its appeal to students.

Activities: A number of respondents expressed the view that there needs to be effort put into organising activities for the matches in order to maintain momentum. There is a belief that if this is done well, it can greatly help the quality of relationships that emerge from the programme. There was also broad consensus that end of term trips are valuable in terms of keeping people on board and interested in the programme.

> *I suppose the effort that the link teacher puts in, the activities and the types of activities really does prove to make or break the strength of the relationship if you get me. Some of my link teachers do lots of cards and appreciation activities, sports, lots of one-to-one where others might do just lots of football and sports and not so much focusing on, do you know, I suppose more the girls that you'd see, in the female schools, in the convents and that that it has, maybe relationships are built a bit stronger.*

4.5 Compliance to the Programme Model

Asked if the schools in their region are compliant with the programme model, Project Officers indicated that many schools are fully compliant but that others are not. Some Project Officers said that all their schools are compliant because they 'laid down the law' from the start and told the schools they had to run the programme in the way specified. Other Project Officers said that, despite their urging the school to adhere to the model, non-compliance issues remain and they find it difficult to get the school to overcome them. The majority of Project Officers were of the view that it is difficult to have full compliance in all schools, as schools will want to tweak the model to suit their individual circumstances. Because every school has a different set of dynamics, the Project Officers do not have full control over how the programme is implemented. In this regard, they believe that the school based mentoring programme differs to the community based programme, where the Project Officers have a higher degree of control and can ensure full compliance. Some of the ways in which non-compliance occurred were as follows:

Matches are not one-to-one: Schools may want to include all first year students and may not have enough senior students. As a result, they deviate from the one-to-one model to a group mentoring approach.

> *some of them …they need those junior students matched up and if the only way to do it is double match them to one senior they'll do it. (Project Officer 4)*

Cross-gender matches are made: The programme model specifies that matches should be same gender but some schools face the challenge of not having enough senior boys to match with junior boys, as described by Project Officer 6. Obviously this issue just occurs in mixed-gender schools.

> *There's always a gender issue within the schools. There's always more senior girls and more junior boys. So in the last couple of years I've had an issue where I'm matching up junior boys with senior girls and for some of them they're happy and they'll do that but I've had a couple of occasions where a junior boy is matched up with a senior girl and he doesn't come back again. So there is the gender thing, I've a huge issue with it. (Project Officer 6)*

The programme does not run for the full school year: The issue was identified that some schools can be

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slow to get the programme off the ground at the start of the school year, and in a small minority of cases, it may start even as late as November. Given that the first weeks are critical in the transition process, this delay means that students are missing out on support at this time. The reason for the late start was attributed to the fact that the school may be preoccupied with other issues around this time of the year and may not prioritise the starting of BBBS. Additionally, some schools like to wait to see which first years are showing a need for the programme before they select their participants. Another related issue is that some schools may end the programme early, as described by Project Officer 1.

> *They found that after Christmas both the littles and the bigs started to lose interest so they decided just to have it as a short term kind of a introductory programme specially for the first years to help them settle in. (Project Officer 1)*

Matches do not meet weekly: Project Officers said that some schools find it challenging to ensure that meetings happen every week, due to other activities happening in the schools, such as sports, musicals, exams and work experience which mean that mentors or mentees are unable to attend BBBS.

> *You contact school and they're like, yeah we didn't do it last week because there was a football match on and we mightn't do it the week after. Sure they're fine……The principal is kind of like, yes we're very happy with the progress of this programme and you're kind of going, it's not really working well. (Project Officer 5)*

The matches do not meet for the required time: The programme manual specifies that meetings should be a minimum of 40 minutes but in some schools, meetings last for just 20-30 minutes. This is because they are often held at lunchtime and students must eat their lunch first.

Lack of compliance with other features of the model: One project worker described how various schools may have their own way of doing things. For example, they don't ask students to fill out the match report cards. Other schools don't provide any end of term trips or reward activities.

> *Match report cards are very good but they don't do them in my schools. There are rarely any of the schools that do the match report cards. I think the students are, they're well able to approach the teachers, again in those schools the link teachers are young and they're approachable and all the students have a good rapport with them so they're well able to approach them. They don't fill in the match report cards or they complain about it. (Project Officer 3)*

Part of the reason for non-compliance relates to the way in which the programme was initially rolled out. In the early years, BBBS was anxious to increase the spread of the programme and were willing to allow schools to adapt it to suit their own circumstances. Thus, some schools where the programme is running

a long time have embedded non-compliance into their practice and find it difficult to change. Some Project Officers describe how they allow non-compliance while schools are finding their feet but urge them to be fully compliant in their second year. Now that the programme is well-established, Foróige management would like to move to a situation where all schools, apart from those in their first year, are compliant with the manual.

> *I think we're a bit more clear of what we're offering them… so the school rings up and says yes, we can do this programme. But this is the way it's going to run, do you still want to do it? Whereas before it was like, oh great, call the school, get in there, let's get it right. And we accept non compliance for the first year and trying to get it as right as possible. (BBBS National Manager)*
>
> *Some schools for example will be very clear, the principal says absolutely want this but I want every first year matched and you go, well how much of them is there and they go, well 72. And how many fifth years do you have? 24. We've a problem there. So the result is that they do operate it on a 1 to 3 or 4 for the first year. ….. We kind of work with them for the year and then we evaluate and we're going, if you thought that was good it can be a whole lot better if it was one-to-one next year. (Project Officer 7)*

There was some divergence in views among Project Officers about whether full compliance is possible. Some were of the view that full compliance is not possible for all schools due to the challenges they face.

> *In an ideal world it would be brilliant if it was one-to-one, same gender matches, 40 minutes, it would be great but it doesn't work like that…. It's very hard to keep the standard in all schools; it's very, very hard. (Project Officer 3)*
>
> *….. maybe if there was a little bit of leeway on it, do you know what I mean? Like I think in these times that we're in resources are low, staff is low and even though the structure is there you have to adapt to what they're, and if they don't have the manpower to do it or if they can't, if they physically don't have the mentors in the school, the question I get back to me is well what am I supposed to say to the first years that want to do it and can't get a mentor? (Project Officer 10)*

Other Project Officers take a different view and believe that there is a need to be firm with schools regarding what the model is and require that they adhere to it. Project Officer 9 described how, when she was new in post, she had been softer regarding non-compliance but with new schools in recent years, she has demanded full compliance and has found that it has been achieved. Similarly, Project Officer 2 reflected on her initial experience and decided to take a harder line regarding compliance, which she has found to work very well.

> *My experience in one school was that the link teacher kept changing it to suit herself and kept wanting to change it and I guess that was down to my own inexperience and learning about the programme. I maybe allowed it to happen…. but for my new schools, I said 'this is the programme, this is what we offer, this is the reason we offer this programme, it's not a general mentoring programme, it's Big Brother Big Sister mentoring'… now all my matches are one-to-one, all the same gender, so, and once I set that out with them, they might have tried to change it, they might have asked could they, but I kept going, explaining the reasons we do it like this and then they took it on board and so they do, they understand and particularly the schools that I've run in the past few years. …They know the run of it at this stage and they know that it can't be any different. (Project Officer 9)*
>
> *There were compromises in that first year in that I let one school run it one mentor to 3 Littles and that just wasn't the programme. So from then on I have been the strictest person ever! I kind of say to them, 'look you're getting this programme for free, you're getting all of our time for free, this is the programme. If you don't want to do it there's absolutely no problem, I've other schools who would like to do it but if you're going to do it you commit to doing it this way'. So I'm very strict with my schools…….But it works really well. I don't have an issue around compliancy. They really respond to it because they appreciate the fact that the programme is offered free of charge and that it's something that really adds to the school environment. So I just think if you're kind of firm but upfront with the people, that's a much better way to run it. (Project Officer 2)*

It is worth noting also that some schools have enhanced the programme. Project Officer 4 gave the example of one school where a small group of senior students are trained to run the programme every year. This school is still in compliance with the programme model, but have managed to achieve this while encouraging additional leadership from students.

> *It's different from the other schools and it's a request from the school is that we train up what we call a student committee for Big Brother Big Sister within the mentoring programme whereby 6 first years and 6 fifth years are nominated by the link teachers to sit on a committee and we train them up on leadership skills. We go out in October time and train them up and what their job, really I suppose to do is to coordinate it as in to organise games and activities, to hand out report cards, tidy the room after and before, you know. So they're kind of given extra responsibility and that works really well. (Project Officer 4)*

As highlighted in Chapter One, Foróige has changed its policy regarding the degree of support offered to schools operating the programme. The issues associated with the transition to a partnership model are discussed in the next section.

4.6 Partnership Model

In recent years as the programme has expanded, Foróige has decided to operate the programme in partnership with schools, rather than taking a direct 'hands-on' approach as had been common in the early stages of programme development. In the past it was not uncommon for the BBBS Project Officer to take responsibility for interviewing, training, matching and actually supervising the meetings on a weekly basis. The partnership model aims to ensure that the programme is provided to the standard required with the school trained and resourced to take lead responsibility for its delivery.

> *We discovered that a lot of the staff were working almost full time in schools, schools became very dependent on us operating the programme. So we had to, in year 2 or 3 really kind of reverse that and start standing back. …. I think initially we had to do that in order to gain access to schools and to get a name for the programme as one of being quite high quality and that worked really well for both the mentees and the mentors. So we had to do a bit of ground work in relation to that but now that the whole manual is set up and the contacts have been made with schools and schools are now approaching us for the programme, it's easier to offer it to them as a partnership model rather than us going in and delivering the programme in the school. (BBBS National Manager)*
>
> *Back in those days the Project Officers would have had a handful of community matches and so they had the time on their hands to be very involved in the school. But in order for us to grow the schools programme, the only way it's going to grow is if we show the school how to run the programme, give them all the support they need to get it up and running and then they just run with it. (Project Officer 1)*

Under the new partnership model, the Project Officer's role is to provide training to teachers and students and to come in 2-3 times a year to check-in and help with any issues that arise. The research highlighted that the Project Officers are in broad agreement with this policy and see the need to adopt a less hands-on role in schools. As with the issues regarding compliance just discussed, there is a sense that it has been easier to implement this approach with schools that are new to the programme and have not been offered an alternative way of working. However, with schools that have been used to a higher level of support from the Project Officer, it has taken longer to make the transition. The outcome is that there is now some variation in the degree of involvement of BBBS officers in different schools.

> *I think it's about setting it off from the start with the schools and not allowing them to become maybe too dependent on you. In the past one school I would have worked with. …from day one they were totally dependent, and I can see how it's very hard to move away from that when you start. ….Yeah they feel a bit cheated then if you start pulling out a bit. (Project Officer 10)*

> *In some schools I do more than in others ... Some schools I would go in and I would .. do all the interviews and all the training and then in other schools the teachers would take half and half…. because the schools that are in it longer I suppose would have been more dependent I would think, it's not that the school necessarily needs more it just means that that's the way it was started and that's the way it was set up 5 or 6 years ago and that they're just so used to that. And even like I suppose they have been great in the sense that I'm not there every week now and maybe they were used to that years ago as well but they have developed and come on a long way and taken a lot of ownership on themselves. And then the new schools, like the ones that we set up more recently would be I suppose more, they would take a lot more on as regards even doing the interviews themselves as well. (Project Officer 9)*

Another reason for the variation in support offered relates to differences in opinion among Project Officers regarding what is necessary or optimal to ensure that the programme is run well in schools. For example, Project Officer 5 believes that there is a need for the Project Officers to be involved in interviewing and matching at the start of the school year as this helps to ensure that the programme gets off to a strong start and that students see it as something different to 'normal' school activities. She also welcomes this involvement as a means of identifying young people who would benefit from the community mentoring programme. On the other hand, Project Officer 2, in keeping with the partnership model, provides training to the link teachers and allows them to take responsibility for the interviewing and matching. She is of the view that the matching is actually more effective when undertaken by teachers as they know the students. Similarly, one Project Officer encourages link teachers to provide the training to students themselves while the majority believe that it is important that the training is done by Foróige staff as it helps to distinguish the programme from other school initiatives.

> *I understand that we haven't time to be there every single week for supervision and I wouldn't do that at all now but I think the first months, I think it's important that we are there, that we are going in interviewing the kids. We are training them, that they see an external service coming in and don't associate it with the teacher and the classroom. I think it's important that we are there at the beginning and even just when we make the matches, you know, you come in then and you just find the match with the link teacher they go oh, you picked up on that as well…..and also I would have had picked up on kids that would benefit from the community mentoring programme, the first years particularly. I'd say 5 or 6 of my referrals over the last couple of weeks have been from students who are doing the school mentoring, yeah. So I think something that the school mentoring is underestimated, undervalued in that sense. (Project Officer 5)*

> *I literally train them to do the intake process. So that's introducing the programme, disseminating the application forms, the teacher reference forms, actually doing the interviews and actually making the matches. It takes about two and a half hours and I explain to them how to supervise and run the programme on a week to week basis, different projects they can work on, different activities that they have. So then I come to the school once, usually around late October, early November to train the first years and the 4th years over 1 day. Then I come back to the school mid to late January to check in and see how things are going and just to make sure it's all running the way it's supposed to be running and that there aren't any problems and then I go back again in May to do the end of year evaluations. So I really only go to the school 3 times during the year. Now I'm obviously available to the link teachers and I've met them all and I've done the training with them but that's just the slightly different way of doing it……. The teachers are absolutely fantastic and the reality is they know the kids a lot better, they'd have relationships in the staff room where they can kind of say, oh I'm thinking of putting Mary with Michelle, what do you think? So I think the matches tend to be a little bit better when they're made by the teachers. So I think that's kind of a big part of it. (Project Officer 2)*

Project Officer 2 does not believe that the quality of the programme suffers as a result of this approach and is able to identify through the evaluation process if there are any issues that need to be addressed. As highlighted in this quote, there is a strong degree of commitment to the programme in the schools she works in, which helps to ensure that they will make the partnership model work. However, there is a reluctance among Project Officers to take a more hands-off role where they are a little unsure whether the school will give the level of attention required. Project Officer 1 made the point that the quality under the partnership model will be as good if the link teacher is committed and willing to invest the necessary time. Project Officer 7 if of the view that the standard of the programme can decline when a more hands-off approach is taken by the link teacher, as the following quote illustrates.

> *From my own personal experience I found that unless you're supporting them, it's very difficult……You want quality. Like it can be done and I've done it but then when you go and you do the evaluations ……they wouldn't be meeting regularly; they mightn't be doing anything productive, like matching 2 people to 1 person. And they're just restricted then by time, the teachers, so they just kind of go with the show if you're not there. If you're there you can kind of say 'well look, how about we try and get another student from a different year that would be interested in doing it?' You'd be putting ideas in their head and just following up. (Project Officer 7)*

For Project Officer 7, her key concern is that, where the programme is not run well and standards slip, the outcomes for children are not as good.

> *I: In those schools where it wasn't delivered as well, do you think the outcomes for the young people weren't as good?*
>
> *P: Definitely not. And that was coming from the students themselves through evaluations that they weren't getting to meet, it was boring, they weren't, you know, there was nothing coming out of it for them like. (Project Officer 7)*

4.7 Recommendations

Respondents were asked if they had any recommendations for changes to the programme in the future. The following issues were highlighted.

- Littles and bigs could work together on a joint project, for example for the citizenship programme or Gaisce award. Such a project would encourage teamwork and bonding, as well as having a dual benefit in terms of civic knowledge or learning.

- More training for mentors, including a refresher half way through the year to remind them of their commitment and look at how they can develop their role.

- Make sure young people are asked if there is anyone they don't want to be matched with, in case there are family feuds or issues that might affect the match.

- Ask schools to contribute a small amount for the programme to avoid their having to fundraise for activities.

- Explore more options for running the match meetings during class time or provide lunch to minimise disruption during lunch time

- Invite back previous mentors to identify the activities they enjoyed while doing the programme.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the views of BBBS Managers and Project Officers regarding the operation of the programme. It has identified the factors that they believe are associated with the successful running of the programme and highlighted issues associated with ensuring compliance to the programme and partnership models in schools.

The core purpose of the programme is seen by staff as helping with the transition to secondary school. Staff believe that it is successful in doing so, helping first year students to make friends, feel more comfortable in the school and have a safe place to go to for some lunchtimes. Project Officers and managers were also of the view that it helps senior students to develop their concept of themselves as volunteers and helpers and provides them with the skills to do so. They also spoke of benefits to the wider school community in terms of creating a climate of support.

Because they are responsible for the running of the programme in several schools, Project Officers are uniquely placed to provide an insight into the factors that are conducive to the successful running of the programme in schools. Respondents identified the attitude and ability of the link teacher as the most important factor, followed by buy-in from school principals and the wider school staff. The consensus is that the programme runs best where schools and link teachers are firmly behind it and willing to give it the time and space that it needs to operate effectively. They also expressed the view that the programme works best when targeted at a smaller number of students rather than an entire first year cohort as is the case in some schools.

Many schools do not comply with the programme model and the reasons for this were explored with Project Officers and managers. Some schools want to match all first year students and deviate from the one-to-one matching model if they don't have enough senior students to match with first year students. In some schools, cross-gender matches are made, while in others the programme does not run for the full school year. Other issues are that matches do not meet weekly on a consistent basis, meetings are shorter than recommended or other aspects of the model such as match report cards are not adhered to. There is some divergence in views among Project Officers regarding whether full compliance is possible in all schools. Some Project Officers reported that they have demanded full compliance and it has been secured, whereas others feel that some schools are not in a position to be fully compliant with the programme model. There also appears to be variation in the levels of support offered by Project Officers in different schools and there have been challenges in moving to the partnership model that is now programme policy.

The next chapter, Chapter Five brings together the themes emerging in the report from all respondent groups to form a series of conclusions regarding the BBBS schools programme.

5. Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This is the first formal research project undertaken in relation to the BBBS schools programme in Ireland. Its purpose is primarily to describe the programme model and to assess the perspectives of stakeholders regarding its value and operations. Thus far in this research report, the perspectives of stakeholder groups have been presented separately in order to provide a clear and transparent account of the evidence gathered as part of the study. In this chapter, the perspectives are synthesised in order to answer the core research questions and reach a series of conclusions regarding the programme. The chapter is structured according to the core research questions, which are as follows:

- What is the core purpose of the BBBS schools programme?

- Is the programme model in line with best practice in school peer mentoring?

- What outcomes are perceived to result from the programme for mentees, mentors and the wider school in compliant schools?

- Is the programme perceived to add value to existing practices?

- What are the views of stakeholders regarding the programme implementation - its strengths, challenges, areas for improvement?

- What recommendations can be made to guide the future development of the programme?

- What issues arising in this research need to be considered in the design of a future impact study?

5.2 What is the Core Purpose of the BBBS Schools Programme?

There is a broad consensus in the research literature 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 these can be exacerbated for those students who also experience personal or family difficulties (Akos, 2004). The transition process can last for up to a year and can have an influence on 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 aim to create a community of kinship, one that values pupil involvement (Naughton, 2000; Hargreaves et al, 1996).

The core purpose of the BBBS schools programme is to improve the transition of young people to secondary school, through mobilising the support of older peers to help the younger students to settle into the school. It is envisaged that the older students will help their younger peers by answering queries about the school, explaining how it operates and empathising with their experiences. As the 'matches' meet weekly in a room with other matches, and the programme facilitates activities to enable relationship development, it is also intended that the first year students will develop deeper bonds with other participants. The programme is designed to address many of the issues raised in the literature on school transition, including familiarising students with the organisational aspects of the new school, providing 'areas of comfort' and smaller units within the school to support bonding, facilitating peer relationships, lessening anxiety and dispelling myths (Simons, 1987; Hargreaves et al, 1996).

5.3 Is the Programme Model in Line with Best Practice in School Peer Mentoring?

The literature review highlights research evidence that school based mentoring programmes can help to improve connectedness to school, facilitate peer support and improve academic outcomes for participants (Karcher, 2007). However, to be effective, programmes should adhere to a core set of practices associated with effective peer mentoring programmes. Karcher (2007) points to the need for well-structured programmes that include mentor selection, mentor and mentee training, clear expectations, a structured approach, activities, supervision of matches, formal endings and agency support. Figure 5 below sets out the key features associated with good practice in mentoring, as identified by Karcher (2007). The column to the right identifies aspects of the BBBS programme model that adhere to these criteria. It can be seen that practices are in place to correspond to each of the good practice criteria. Based on this analysis, the BBBS schools programme model, as set out in its programme manual, can be considered a 'model of good practice' in cross-age peer mentoring provision.

Figure 5: Good practice criteria for cross-age peer mentoring programmes and in the BBBS schools programme.

Good Practice in cross-age peer mentoring (as identified by Karcher, 2007)	BBBS schools programme practice
• Clear expectations for mentors and mentees regarding **frequency / duration** of meetings	• All matches meet for a minimum of 40 minutes per week from September / October to April / May in a group setting
• **Recruit** mentors who are caring, helpful and interested in others • Avoid recruiting only high risk youth; instead look for mixed-risk status among mentees	• Mentor application and interview explores suitability for mentoring role • Mixed profile of youth sought
• **Mentor screening** to include personal references for mentors	• Application / consent / reference from a teacher • Interview: 10 - 15 minutes per applicant
• Initial and ongoing **training** that prepares and empowers mentors. • Training that shows mentees how to make the most of the relationship.	• 3 hours training for mentors (includes communication & listening, teamwork, characteristics of a good mentor, logistics of the programme, confidentiality and child protection) • 1-2 hours training for mentees (includes hopes and concerns about being a mentee, logistics of the programme, things to talk about, confidentiality)
• Regular and frequent **monitoring and support** by program staff.	• Participants complete match report card after every session • Mid-point evaluation – focus group with mentor and mentee groups separately • End-point evaluation – individual evaluation form • Evaluation with BBBS Programme co-ordinator • BBBS Project Officer available to deal with issues that arise
• A curriculum or other set of structured **activities**	• Link teacher facilitates weekly group activities • One group outing per term recommended • Guidance on activities provided by BBBS staff • End of year recognition event and award of certificates

5.4 What Outcomes are Perceived to Result from the Programme for Mentees, Mentors and the Wider School in Compliant Schools?

As highlighted in the methodology, the research focused on outcomes associated with the programme in schools that are operating with fidelity to the programme model. This part of the chapter collates the evidence in relation to outcomes identified by the various stakeholder groups.

Perceived outcomes for mentees: Respondents, including mentors, mentees, principals, link teachers and Project Officers referred to a range of positive outcomes that they believe result from the programme. The majority of mentees said that, for them, having a big brother or sister meant having someone older in the school to talk to and to help with any problems they may have. The main benefits identified by mentees related to the development of new friendships, having fun and the security of knowing that there is somebody there 'looking out for them'. Similarly, mentors believe that mentees benefit from the programme in terms of having someone older to talk to in the school, being more confident and less likely to be bullied.

Principals and link teachers expressed the view that mentees develop new friendships with their same age and older peers, feel more at ease in the school and have a better support network as a result of their participation in the programme. They are also seen to improve in confidence and self-esteem and in general feel more safe, secure and settled at school. Some respondents also believe that the programme can play a role in addressing and preventing bullying incidents. The fact that the programme harnesses peer rather than teacher support was seen to be particularly important in enabling these outcomes to occur. BBBS staff also believe that the programme is successful in smoothing the transition of first years into secondary school and does so by helping first year students to make friends, feel more comfortable in the school and have a safe place to go to for some lunchtimes.

The benefits of the programme identified by respondents can be divided into the more immediate or tangible outcomes and more distal outcomes that are seen to result from the primal outcomes. Figure 6 summarises the outcomes for mentees identified across all respondent groups and divides them into primal and distal outcomes. It should be noted that these outcomes are based on the perceptions of stakeholders and have not been 'proven' to result from the programme. However, they provide valuable guidance for the selection of outcome measures that could be introduced as part of future monitoring and evaluation of programme outcomes (as discussed later in this chapter).

Figure 6: List of primal and distal outcomes for mentees identified by research respondents

Primal outcomes identified	Distal outcomes identified
• They have an older friend and role model who has been through the school system • They get assistance with practicalities associated with the school – e.g. lockers, timetables, facilities. • They get to know their peers better • They get to know the senior students better • They get to know support staff (link teachers) better • It provides somewhere safe for children to go at lunchtime • Bullying issues may be identified and dealt with sensitively • They receive positive feedback and encouragement from their mentor • Their own mentor and other mentors 'look out for them' in other settings, such as on the school bus or in the canteen • Their mentor may introduce them to other opportunities – such as youth groups, school sports, etc. • They have fun • May be referred to community mentoring programme if appropriate	• Feeling safer and more secure at school • Feeling happier with a greater sense of well-being • Increased confidence and self-esteem • Greater connection to school • Perceive school as a more caring place • Greater take-up of school activities by mentored students • Increase in perceived support from peers and teachers • Increased likelihood of staying in school • Boundaries between senior and junior students are reduced

Perceived outcomes for mentors: In this research, mentors identified the benefits of the mentoring role for themselves as a sense of satisfaction derived from feeling that they have helped a younger student, perks associated with participation such as taking part in activities and having fun and the development of confidence and skills in the area of listening and communication. Principals and link teachers said that they look upon the BBBS programme as a way of nurturing a sense of responsibility in senior students and providing them with formal and informal opportunities to contribute to the welfare of the school community. For many students, it is their first formal experience of volunteering and many of the respondents also expressed the view that the experience nurtures a sense of social awareness in students, in that it encourages them to see situations from the perspectives of others. Project Officers and managers were also of the view that it helps senior students to develop their concept of themselves as volunteers and helpers and provides them with the skills to do so.

Figure 7: Outcomes identified for mentors

- Satisfaction from helping others & giving something back to the school

- Enjoyment and fun

- Broader social network

- Respect and acknowledgement from the school

- Experience of value for job applications, CV preparation, job interviews

- Greater social awareness and empathy

- Training in helping skills and opportunity to practice these skills

- Confidence

- Sense of identity as having something to contribute to society

- Experience of volunteering

Perceived outcomes for the overall school: Principal and link teachers said that the programme has helped to create a culture of caring in the wider school community and helps in the early identification and prevention of issues affecting younger students. A number of respondents said that giving older students the responsibility for caring for younger students and empowering them with the skills to do so, means that the school has a more comprehensive approach to pastoral care than it would if it just relied on staff input. Foróige staff also expressed the view that the programme can bring benefits to the wider school community in terms of creating a climate of support.

Figure 8: Outcomes identified for the wider school community

- Helps to create a more supportive climate in the school

- Ensures that minor issues affecting first year students are picked up on before they escalate

- Reduces the burden on teachers with regard to answering minor queries from students

- Helps to extend the reach of the school pastoral care efforts to encompass peer interactions

5.5 Is the Programme Perceived to Add Value to Existing Practices?

School principals and link teachers taking part in the research indicated that they had identified a need for some type of support programme for incoming first year students and adopted this programme because they believed it could meet the need identified. Many spoke of other support structures they have in place,

including pastoral care teams, student councils and home-school liaison programmes and their belief that the BBBS programme was well placed to complement these support structures. For example, almost half of all schools operating the BBBS programme in 2010/2011 were also running the Schools Completion Programme. Feedback from respondents suggests that the BBBS programme is used as part of the school completion programme strategy around retention of vulnerable students in school. The research highlights that School Completion Programme co-ordinators and / or Home School Liaison Officers are often tasked with running or supporting the BBBS programme in their schools which can help to ensure that all of the schools efforts in relation to support for vulnerable students are co-ordinated.

In assessing the value of this programme, a further question that arises is how the BBBS programme brings added-value compared to in-house mentoring programmes run by schools. The key features identified in the research are its structured approach, the fact that it is rooted in research regarding good practice in peer mentoring programmes and is facilitated by Foróige, who can bring specialist expertise to bear. The programme is seen to have a good 'brand' strength as a national mentoring programme which ensures that it is taken seriously by students and teachers. The BBBS schools programme also has the benefit of lasting the school year. The evidence in this study suggests that school-run buddy systems can often just last for a few months, and the longer duration and structured approach of the BBBS model is welcomed by stakeholders.

The added-value or 'unique selling point' of the programme is also perceived to relate to its role in mobilising peer support. The findings of this study reflect research literature which point to the specific advantages of peer support models for young people. We saw that principals and link teachers believe that peer mentors are uniquely placed to understand the 'journey travelled' by their younger peers and can effectively tailor support to their needs. They have a presence in environments that teachers may not and thus can provide support as required. 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. Young people participating in the research also referred specifically to the advantages of having an older person in the school who they can go to with issues that they would not approach a teacher about.

5.6 What are the Views of Stakeholders Regarding the Programme Implementation?

The BBBS programme model was developed by Foróige for implementation in secondary schools across Ireland. It is inevitable that issues related to implementation will arise, given that each of the 64 schools in which the programme is operating has a unique culture and set of dynamics. The challenge for Foróige is to ensure that the programme is run to a consistently high standard in each of the participating schools. It must do this in a context of scarce resources and strong demand for services for vulnerable young people. This research explored the views of stakeholders regarding implementation issues and the key issues raised are now addressed.

The research highlights that the implementation of the programme is greatly supported by two factors. Firstly, there is broad support for the programme model among stakeholders. Principals and link teachers

believe that the programme model is robust and that its various features are important for the delivery of a quality programme (although it should be noted that all are drawn from schools that are compliant with the programme model). Young people and Foróige Project Officers taking part in the research also expressed satisfaction with the programme model. Furthermore, there is a belief among all stakeholder groups that it is successful in achieving its objectives, as described in the previous part of this chapter, which in turn reinforces support for the features of the model. Secondly, the expertise and approach of Foróige staff in supporting schools to deliver the programme was rated very highly by principals and link teachers. All respondents spoke very positively of their working relationships with Foróige staff, who are believed to have a good understanding of school needs and pressures and an excellent rapport with young people. Their expertise in working with young people was valued and their input in terms of training and other support was deemed to be effective and appropriate. There are indications that the relationships built through the schools programme have led to partnerships between schools and Foróige in relation to other programmes for young people.

A range of issues and challenges associated with the schools programme were identified in the research.

Need for strong commitment from schools: As outlined in Chapter One, schools are given the programme free of charge but they are expected to take responsibility for ensuring that it is delivered to the standard required. Principals and link teachers taking part in the research highlighted the need for schools to invest time, resources and energy into the programme if it is to be a success. Likewise, the feedback from Project Officers emphasised the attitude and approach of the link teacher as a critical factor in determining how well the programme will operate in schools. They also stressed the need for the principal to be aware of and committed to the programme and for back-up support from a team of other teachers. The conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that the programme model will only work to its full potential if adequately resourced and supported in the host school environment.

Ensuring compliance to the programme and partnership models: More than half of all schools operating the programme are not in compliance with the desired programme model. The main reason for this appears to relate to the historical legacy of how the programme was initially 'rolled out'. Up until relatively recently, the desire to increase the numbers of schools operating the programme took precedence over ensuring compliance to the programme model. The policy at that time was that compliance issues could be addressed at a later stage, once targets for numbers of schools operating the programme had been reached. While the policy of Foróige is now to require compliance from all schools from their second year of operating the programme, feedback from BBBS managers and Project Officers suggests that it can be difficult to persuade schools to change their practices if they have become accustomed to a particular way of working. The view was expressed that it is easier to secure compliance in the cases of schools that are new to the programme. The research has also highlighted that there is some variation in the views of Project Officers regarding whether full compliance is possible – with some requiring and securing full compliance from their schools and others asking for compliance but showing a willingness

to compromise if the school makes what they believe to be a valid case for non-compliance.

This is obviously a critical issue for the programme going forward. We have seen that the programme model is in line with good practice in cross-age peer mentoring and the research literature also suggests that adherence to this good practice criteria is associated with better outcomes from the programme for young people. The majority of Project Officers taking part in this research also expressed the views that quality can be compromised if the model is not fully adhered to. The issue of how this matter can be addressed will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

Ensuring adequate dosage: One of the consistent findings from evaluations of school-based mentoring programmes is that students may not get enough hours of the intervention to make a real difference to them (Herrera et al, 2011; Karcher, 2007). This issue also emerged in this research. Many principals and link teachers said that it can be difficult to ensure that the BBBS meetings happen weekly and for the required duration due to pressure from sporting fixtures, other extra-curricular activities and timetabling constraints. Some schools may not start the programme until late October or November which means that a critical phase in the transition process has passed.

Varied intake policies: The research has highlighted that there is some variation in relation to intake policies among schools operating the programme, with some schools offering the programme to all first year students and others offering it to a targeted group of young people. The data in relation to numbers of matches in schools highlights that the majority of schools have up to 30 matches, which indicates that they run it on a targeted basis. The preferred approach among BBBS Project Officers appears to be a targeted one, on the basis that it is easier to ensure higher standard of programme and be compliant with the programme model when offered to a smaller number of students.

Need for variety and structure: The feedback from students suggests that there is a need for a greater variety of activities to maintain interest and momentum throughout the school year. The suggestion made by one Project Officer that bigs and littles could work on a project together could be a way of ensuring that relationships have a focus around which they can develop. Obviously it would be important to ensure that matches still had time to talk informally and that the emphasis was on fun as well as project work.

5.7 What Issues Arising in this Research Need to be Considered in the Design of a Future Impact Study?

This research study was designed to explore the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the BBBS schools mentoring programme, with a particular emphasis on schools where the programme is being implemented as planned by Foróige. It has shown that there is a widespread belief among stakeholders that the programme can make a positive contribution to the successful transition of first year students into secondary school and that it is a robust programme. These findings are important as they provide a rationale for the continued operation of the programme in Ireland. However, from a policy perspective,

it would be valuable to undertake further research to assess whether the outcomes perceived to result from the programme do actually occur. Among the key research questions to be addressed include an exploration of whether young people participating in the BBBS schools mentoring programme:

- are more likely to stay in school for longer than they would have if they had not taken part in the programme.

- feel more connected to school than they would have if they had not taken part in the programme.

- have more positive peer relationships than they would have if they had not taken part in the programme.

- do better academically than they would have if they had not taken part in the programme.

It would also be valuable to explore whether the perceived outcomes for mentors – including leadership skills, social awareness and career development – can be proven.

The research design most suited to answering these types of questions is an experimental design, whereby outcomes for students participating in the BBBS schools programme would be compared to similar students who did not participate in the programme. Study participants would be allocated to either a treatment or control / comparison group and the average outcomes for participants would be assessed through surveys at designated time points. Foróige is giving particular consideration of the possibility of undertaking an experimental or quasi-experimental design study similar to that undertaken in relation to the BBBS community programme (Dolan et al, 2011). This part of the chapter discusses a number of the issues to be borne in mind in future research design.

On the positive side, there are a number of factors that would facilitate the effective implementation of an experimental design study. This research process has demonstrated that there is good buy-in from schools for research into the programme and that many of them value the opportunity to contribute to it. Another positive factor is that the programme is clearly articulated and structured and set out in a programme manual. The analysis in this report indicates that the rationale for the programme is sound, that it is based on a plausible theory of change and there is a belief among stakeholders that it is achieving its objectives. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that experimental design is not suitable for programmes in early stages of implementation as, if the programme changes during the intervention, there is no easy way to determine what effects are produced by any given form of the intervention. Ghate (2001) suggests that services have had time to 'bed down' so that teething problems can be overcome. This is not an issue in

this context as the programme can be considered well-established and there are a core set of schools experienced in its delivery. Another key strength is that the study participants are a captive audience – i.e. their daily presence in the school environment would facilitate their participation in research processes.

A key question that arises is whether the anticipated effects would be sufficiently strong to be detected quantitatively. There is a perception, reported in this study, that relationships in the school mentoring programme are not as strong as in the community based programme, there is some degree of attrition in all schools and the research has also highlighted issues associated with ensuring adequate dosage in this and other school based programmes. These factors indicate that the programme effects may not be strong enough to produce a statistically significant effect. Sample size would be a critical issue as, for interventions such as this one that are likely to have small or variable effects, both treatment and control groups must be quite large. A power analysis would have to be undertaken to predict whether the anticipated effects could be detected based on projected sample sizes.

We saw in the research that almost half of schools are not fully compliant with the BBBS model. As a first step, an auditing or screening procedure would be required to identify compliant schools. Consideration would have to be given to whether a big enough sample can be drawn from schools that are fully compliant and willing to take part in the research. Allowance would also have to be made for participant consent procedures, which would further reduce the sample. Options for comparing outcomes between compliant and non-compliant schools could also be considered.

The timeframe required to answer some of the key research questions is also a critical issue. While outcomes such as connectedness to school and peers could be assessed after one year, other outcomes would take longer to gather evidence on. For example, in order to assess whether the programme is effective in retaining young people at school for longer than they would otherwise have stayed, data or measures would have to be collected 5 to 6 years after the baseline. This would obviously require significant resources.

Attention would also have to be given to how the effects of the BBBS schools programme can be disentangled from those of other programmes, such as school completion, pastoral care and home school liaison which vary from school to school. Monitoring processes would have to be sufficiently robust to identify whether factors other than the BBBS schools programme brought about any change in outcomes. Another concern, as in all experimental research, is that staff may favour control group participants with additional supports to compensate for the fact that they are not in the treatment group (Clarke and Oxman, 1999). For example, participants who don't receive a mentor may seek an informal mentor of some kind or become more dependent on school staff for support. There is also a risk that the *Hawthorne effect* may be present, in other words, they may be conscious that they are under scrutiny and behave differently than they would under normal programme circumstances. In these cases, impact estimates are likely to be biased. In medical trials, blinding is used to ensure that research participants are unsure of their research status but this would not be possible in this context.

Campbell (1984) stresses the importance of external validity in ensuring that the study is actually relevant to the wider community and policy process. The external validity of studies can be compromised by the fast changing policy priorities, which can see a particular programme rendered redundant due to changing priorities (Orr, 1999). In the current economic context, resourcing issues may take precedence over research results in decisions regarding funding for the programme. Given the costs and staff commitment required for experimental studies, a decision would have to be made, therefore, regarding whether there is sufficient need for the research at this time. Other options regarding research are also possible. For example, research instruments could be built into programme practices to assess whether outcomes are being realised. While this would obviously have less causal strength than an experimental design as it does not involve a comparative dimension, it could nonetheless help to build indicative evidence that the programme is achieving its goals.

A key issue that would arise in designing an experimental study relates to the composition of the treatment and control groups. Comparing a cohort of schools where the programme is running with those where it is not is one option. However, a difficulty with this approach is that it would be difficult to account for the effects of school climate and culture on outcomes. Another option would be to compare outcomes for participants with non-participants within participating schools. An obvious drawback is that the treatment group would be the group most in need of the intervention. Attention would also have to be paid to the ethical dilemmas that arise in the context of experimental designs, the most salient being the possibility that the control or treatment group may be deprived of an intervention seen as beneficial.

A logic or theoretical model should be articulated prior to the design of the study so that data collection mechanisms can be framed in a way that enables the logic model or theory to be tested. The outcomes identified in this study as well as the findings from previous quantitative studies in this field provide valuable guidance for the development of a logic model. While the programme model is clearly articulated, one area for potential improvement relates to the target audience for the programme. While it is clear that the programme is for first year students in secondary school, there is a lack of clarity regarding how the intended beneficiaries are to be identified and targeted. As a result, some schools target all first year students while others target students with a mixed profile of risk. In order to specify the desired outcomes to be measured in an impact study, it would be important to pinpoint the precise target group.

As well as assessing outcomes, any future study should also include a process and implementation study. The study would need to demonstrate that the programme has been accurately implemented and consistently operationalised, and thus can be replicated elsewhere. If this is not done, the intervention may appear to be a failure based on outcome evidence, and this may be wrongly attributed to a poor theoretical model rather than poor implementation (Oakley et al, 2003). The process strand of the research could also build on this current research to include an exploration of the factors that facilitate or work against the delivery of the intervention in each school, including school culture and attitudes

among key stakeholder groups. For example, the SHARE study on sexual health education programme in Scotland found evidence of a clear 'school effect' on sexual behaviour and identified that, to be delivered well, there is a need for senior management support, a coherent team, an enthusiastic co-ordinator and sufficiently long lessons (Wight and Obasi, 2003, p.159). Exploration of these issues would greatly assist in the interpretation of outcomes data.

It would also be important to explore differential responses of particular groups within the larger sample on the basis that some groups or individuals are likely to be more receptive to the programme than others. For example, some programmes work differently for males and females. In the case of this programme, it may be useful to test the theory that it works particularly well for students who do not have older siblings in the school or who do not know other students in the school. However, a large enough sample size is required to explore these differences statistically and it is preferable if these hypotheses are formulated in advance to avoid the risk of generating false positives.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has collated the evidence gathered throughout the research report to answer the questions outlined in Chapter one. The following chapter provides a final conclusion to the study and makes a series of recommendations.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The BBBS schools mentoring programme was developed by Foróige in 2003 to help first year students in their transition into secondary school. A large body of research highlights that the transition process can be difficult for young people and can lead to anxiety, a lack of connectedness with the new school and ultimately to a decision to leave school early. Efforts to improve school transition aim to ensure that students are supported to settle into their new school more quickly and to feel part of it. The BBBS schools mentoring programme facilitates the development of one-to-one relationships between first year students and senior students, in the belief that a supportive relationship with an older student can help to ease the transition process for students. The model was developed by Foróige staff in response to identified needs and has been refined in the seven years since it was first piloted in Galway. The programme is currently run in 64 schools in Ireland and almost 1500 first year students were 'matched' in 2010/2011 academic year.

The aim of this research was to assess the programme model and to explore the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the value and operations of the BBBS schools mentoring programme, with a particular emphasis on its operation in schools showing fidelity to the programme model. It is intended that the findings will inform the ongoing development of the programme and guide any future research undertaken in relation to the programme. The research involved 38 interviews with school principals and link teachers, 12 BBBS staff and management and over 100 mentors and mentees. This final chapter sums up the conclusions of the research and makes a series of recommendations.

The review of literature in relation to school transition highlights that it is an issue worthy of attention from a policy point of view, with schools encouraged to implement policies that will support their incoming students at this critical juncture in their educational career. The BBBS schools programme thus addresses a need that is deemed important from a research and policy perspective. The feedback from school principals and link teachers highlights that the programme is meeting a need for a structured transition support programme in schools, something that had previously been lacking in their schools. Overall, their feedback suggests that it is working very well and justifies the time and resources that they have invested in its operation.

Literature on cross-age peer mentoring highlights that programmes of this nature can be effective in improving connectedness to school, peer relationships and academic outcomes and identifies a range of practices associated with effective programmes. These include training for mentors and mentees, clearly specified expectations regarding duration and ongoing supervision by programme staff (Karcher, 2007). The analysis undertaken as part of this study shows that the BBBS schools programme model is in line with such good practice. The programme aims and practices are clearly articulated in a programme manual which makes the required standards clear for all schools operating the programme.

The research explored the outcomes that are perceived to result from the programme. There was considerable convergence in the views of the various stakeholder groups regarding the outcomes accruing from the programme. First year students were seen to gain in terms of having an older friend to help and support them in the school environment. They also benefited from bonding with peers and were seen to feel more comfortable and confident in the school environment. The programme was also believed to help prevent or deal with incidents of bullying. Benefits identified for mentors include the development of leadership skills, career development and a sense of satisfaction from helping a younger student. School principals and link teachers reported that the BBBS schools mentoring programme has helped to build a greater sense of community in their schools. In general, stakeholders are of the view that the aims of the programme as set out in the programme manual are being achieved in practice.

In terms of implementation, there is broad support for the BBBS model among stakeholders and its structured approach is welcomed by principals and link teachers. Principals and link teachers were also very positive regarding the expertise and approach of BBBS and Foróige Project Officers. There is a consensus that the programme requires commitment on the part of schools and that the role of link teachers is particularly significant in ensuring that the programme runs successfully.

The research highlighted three key implementation issues that are worthy of consideration by Foróige. Firstly, just half of all schools currently operating the programme are fully compliant with the programme model. Given the association between adherence to programme practices and successful outcomes from the programme, this is a critical issue for Foróige going forward. Secondly, Foróige management favours a partnership model, whereby support is provided by BBBS staff at key points but the overall running of the programme is the responsibility of the schools. Again, there is considerable variation in adherence to this policy, with evidence that different levels of support are provided to schools. Thirdly, there is also variation between programmes in how they target their students, with some schools including all first year students in the programme and others targeting on the basis of need.

At this juncture, it would be valuable for Foróige to give consideration to whether to require that all schools operating the programme do so according to the desired standard. This would ensure that quality standards are upheld consistently as they are in the BBBS community based programme (Dolan et al, 2011). However, it appears that non-compliance is tolerated as a result of a genuine desire to accommodate schools in running the programme to the best of their abilities, understanding the

constraints they may be facing in terms of teachers and resources. The feedback from school principals and link teachers indicates that this flexibility on the part of staff is appreciated. In terms of addressing the issue, two potential options could be considered by Foróige. The first option for Foróige is to require full compliance within one year of starting the programme, after which Foróige ceases to support the programme in schools that are not compliant. A second option is to introduce a grading system for levels of compliance. This would enable schools to continue to operate the programme if not in full compliance but it would be acknowledged that it is not a 'pure' form of the BBBS programme.

Recommendations

- The BBBS schools programme is perceived to be beneficial to students and the wider school community and should be continued.

- An annual auditing process, such as that operating in the BBBS community mentoring programme, would be valuable in terms of ensuring adherence to quality standards.

- Foróige management should consider whether to adopt a policy requiring full compliance to the programme model (after the first year in operation) or whether to introduce a grading system which acknowledges that varying levels of compliance exist.

- Consideration should also be given to whether a more hard line stance should be taken in relation to implementation of the partnership model in order to ensure an equitable distribution of support among schools taking part in the programme.

- Given that the majority of Project Officers favoured a targeted approach to the recruitment of first year students on the basis that it is more effective and less likely to lead to non-compliance issues, it is worth considering whether a policy in relation to targeting should be included as part of the programme model.

- Some of the feedback from mentors suggests that they were more interested in benefits to themselves than to their mentees. It would be valuable to introduce some form of assessment tool to distinguish those motivated by self-interest from those with a more social orientation, as recommended by Karcher (2007).

- The findings show that the programme is 'evaluable' and options for future research should be considered. At a basic level, this could involve the introduction of research measures for all participants to monitor progress in relation to the outcomes perceived to accrue from the programme. At a more advanced level, it could involve an experimental or quasi-experimental design study.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

List of schools participating in the research

1. St Aidans Comprehensive School, Cootehill, Co. Cavan
2. Colaiste Treasa, Kanturk, Co Cork
3. St Brogan's College, Bandon, Co. Cork
4. Davis College, Mallow, Co. Cork
5. Glanmire Community College, Glanmire, Co. Cork.
6. Colaiste Magh Éne, Bundoran, Co. Donegal.
7. St Michael's Holy Faith Secondary School, Finglas, Dublin 11
8. St. Dominic's Secondary School, Cabra , Dublin 7
9. O'Connell's Secondary C.B.S, Dublin 1
10. St Pauls Secondary School, Oughterard, Co. Galway
11. St Jarlath's College, Mountbellew, Co. Galway
12. Colaiste Chroi Mhuire, An Spideál, Co. na Gaillimhe
13. Headford Presentation College, Headford, Co. Galway.
14. Carrigallen Vocational School, Carrigallen, Co. Leitrim.
15. Mohill Community College, Mohill, Co. Leitrim.
16. Mount St. Michael Secondary School, Co Mayo.
17. St. Brendan's VEC, Belmullet, Co. Mayo
18. Davitt College, Castlebar, Co Mayo
19. Largy College, Clones, Co. Monaghan
20. Brendan's Community School, Birr, Co. Offaly
21. Elphin Community College, Elphin, Co. Roscommon
22. Loreto College, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
23. St. Aloysius College, Athlone, Co. Westmeath

Schools in which Mentor and Mentee focus groups were held:
St. Brendan's VEC, Belmullet, Co. Mayo
Mohill Community College, Mohill, Co. Leitrim.
Headford Presentation College, Headford, Co. Galway.
Colaiste Magh Éne, Bundoran, Co. Donegal.
O'Connell's Secondary C.B.S, Dublin 1

Appendix 2:

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Appendix 3:

Consent Forms

Young Person Consent Form

Study Title: Evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme

Name of Researcher: Bernadine Brady

1. I have read the information sheet for the above study and have had the chance to ask questions.

2. I understand the information provided and have had enough time to think about it

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can decide not to continue, without giving any reason.

4. I agree to take part

Name of Participant   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Parent / Guardian   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

School Principal and Linked Teacher Information sheet and Consent Form

Date: 24th February 2011

Study Title: Evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme

I am carrying out a study of the **Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme** to see if young people benefit from taking part in it. The study also explores the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the programme – for example its benefits, challenges, structures, procedures and other issues.

All Principals and linked teachers in participating schools are being asked to take part in the research.

- If you choose to take part you will be asked to take part in a telephone interview about the programme which will last no more than 30 minutes.
- I would also like your support and co-operation in arranging focus groups of students in the schools.
- The information obtained from participating principals, link teachers and students will be confidential and no school or individual names will be used.
- If you choose to take part you may withdraw from the study at any stage.
- No personal questions will be asked.

If you have any questions about the research please do not hesitate to contact the researcher:

Bernadine Brady

Child & Family Research Centre

School of Political Science & Sociology

NUI, Galway

Bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie

Tel: 091 495759

School Principal and Linked Teacher Consent Form   Date: 24th February 2011

Study Title: Evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme

Name of Researcher: Bernadine Brady

Name of Respondent: _____

- I confirm that I have read the letter dated 24th February 2011for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time

- I agree to take part in the research

Name of Respondent   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

Foróige / BBBS Staff Information Sheet and Consent Form

Date: 21st February 2011

Study Title: Evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme

I am carrying out a study of the **Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme** to see if young people benefit from taking part in it. The study also explores the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the programme – for example its benefits, challenges, structures, procedures and other issues. All BBBS staff with a role in relation to the programme are being asked to take part in the research.

- If you choose to take part you will be asked to take part in an interview about the programme which will last no more than 90 minutes (probably 30-60 minutes).
- I would also like you support and co-operation in liaising with the participating schools, as agreed with the BBBS National Manager and Operations Manager.
- The information obtained will be confidential and no names will be used. However, please note that it will be possible to identify respondents in the written report if job titles are used and only one such post exists (for example, Foróige CEO, BBBS National Manager and BBBS Operations Manager).
- If you choose to take part you may withdraw from the study at any stage.
- No personal questions will be asked.

If you have any questions about the research please do not hesitate to contact the researcher:

Bernadine Brady

Child & Family Research Centre

School of Political Science & Sociology

NUI, Galway

Tel: 091 495759

Bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie

Foróige / BBBS Staff Information sheet and Consent Form   Date: 21st February 2011

Study Title: Evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters School Programme

Name of Researcher: Bernadine Brady

Name of Staff member: _____

Please tick the boxes if you agree with the following statements

- I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 21st February 2011 for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time

- I agree to take part in the research

Name of Staff member   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Date: Signature

_____   _____   _____

Appendix 4:

Focus Group and Interview Schedules

Littles (first years)

Introduction:

- Explain who we are

- Explain why we are doing this research – see if the programme works well, what young people think of it, if it's worth funding

- Assure them that the discussion is confidential – no names used, won't tell school what they have said

- Ask them to agree not to make fun of each other's answers, to have respect for everybody's viewpoint

- Ask if it's Ok to use recorder – nobody will listen to it except researchers and will delete then

Opening warm-up

- Can you tell me your own name, your big brother or sister's name and something you and he / she have in common.

Opening questions (warm-up)

- (if time) What is it like starting secondary school? Is it very different to primary?

- How does the BBBS programme work in this school? Do you have to apply? Do all first years do it? Do you meet at lunchtime? What do you do when you meet? Do people turn up every week?

Post-it questions

- I decided to take part in BBBS because…..

- For me, having a big brother or sister means…..

- For me, the best thing about taking part in BBBS has been….

- The BBBS programme would be better if …..

Each participant writes their answers on post-its, the facilitator collects and puts on flip chart page. Each question is then discussed in the group (time permitting).

Close

- Ask them if there is anything else they would like to add that we haven't asked.

- Thank them for their participation.

- Let them know that we will send on a summary of the research when we are finished

Bigs (TY, fifth or sixth years)

Introduction:

- Explain who we are

- Explain why we are doing this research – see if the programme works well, what young people think of it, if it's worth funding

- Assure them that the discussion is confidential – no names used, won't tell school what they have said

- Ask them to agree not to make fun of each other's answers, to have respect for everybody's viewpoint

- Ask if it's Ok to use recorder – nobody will listen to it except researchers and will delete then

Opening warm-up

- Can you tell me your own name, your big brother or sister's name and something you and he / she have in common.

Opening questions (warm-up)

- (if time) What is it like starting secondary school? Is it very different to primary?

- How does the BBBS programme work in this school? Do you have to apply? Do all first years do it? Do you meet at lunchtime? What do you do when you meet? Do people turn up every week?

Post-it questions

- I decided to become a mentor because…..

- The benefits for me from being a mentor have been…..

- I think that the benefits for my little from being involved have been….

- Being a mentor is harder than I expected. I agree because…. Or I disagree because…

- The BBBS programme would be better if …..

Each participant writes their answers on post-its, the facilitator collects and puts on flip chart page. Each question is then discussed in the group (time permitting).

Close

- Ask them if there is anything else they would like to add that we haven't asked.

- Thank them for their participation.

- Let them know that we will send on a summary of the research when we are finished

Interview questions for school principals / linked teachers

- Why did you decide to run the programme in your school?

- What do you see as the benefits for young people, if any?

- What do you see as the benefits for mentors, if any?

- What is the benefit for your schools, if any?

- Have you experienced any difficulties or challenges in delivering the programme in your school?

- Some schools run their own in-house mentoring programmes. What are the key differences between these and the BBBS programme?

- How have you experienced working with Foróige / BBBS staff?

- Do you plan to continue with the programme in the future?

- Would you recommend it to other schools?

Interview que stions for BBBS Project Officers

Intro

- How long have you been working for BBBS?

- How many schools are you currently responsible for the programme in?

- What do you see as the main purpose of the BBBS schools programme?

Outcomes from the programme

- What are the benefits for first years?

- What are the benefits for mentors?

- What are the benefits for schools?

- What are the key differences between relationships in the school based programme and in the community based programme?

- Are there some young people / mentors who don't benefit from it or could be harmed by it?

Operational issues

- Are there particular schools where it works really well? What is it about these schools?

- Are there schools where it does not work well? Why?

- Are the schools partners or do you run the programme directly? How have you found the transition from direct provision to the partnership model? Does this impact on quality?

- Some schools offer the programme to a smaller number while others include all first years. Do you have experience of both approaches? Do you think either approach is better / worse?

- What are the main challenges you face in delivering the programme?

- Do young people and mentors meet consistently?

- Do they meet for the required time?

Sum up

- To sum up, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the programme?

- If you were to make recommendations for the programme into the future, what would they be?

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Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE