Formal teacher-pupil mentoring in Irish second-level education:
'The Blackwater Experience'

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Abstract

This study analysed the 2009/10 formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme at Blackwater Community School (BCS), Lismore, Co. Waterford in the Republic of Ireland. Twenty three teachers voluntarily mentored 220 pupils sitting state examinations as part of the scheme, which was monitored by two mentoring coordinators. Benefits and drawbacks of the scheme are discussed under the topics of quality in the mentoring relationship, organisation and perceived impact of the scheme. It was found that the most beneficial outcome of the scheme was the development of positive relationships between teachers and pupils involved.

Key words: Mentoring, formal mentoring programmes, teacher- pupil mentorships, education

Introduction

Mentoring has long been a currency for helping people in organisations. In business, formal mentoring programmes exist that are aimed at improving the performance of protégés[1] by providing them with developmental guidance and assistance from a more senior, experienced individual (Kram, 1985). Studies on mentoring participation in business indicate that up to two-thirds of employees have engaged in some type of mentoring relationship as part of their professional development (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992, Ragins & Cotton, 1991, Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Persons in such organisations who have taken on a voluntary mentoring role or have been mentored perceived it to be a rewarding and educational experience that provides intrinsic satisfaction (Parise & Forrett, 2008; Lennox Terrion, Philion, & Leonard, 2007). Some Irish institutes of higher education appoint mentors as support aids for students. For example, Waterford Institute of Technology has implemented a mentoring programme within the Department of Tourism and Languages for its culinary arts students. A similar programme exists within the University of Limerick for pre-service Science teachers (Kiely, 2005).

Internationally, much research has been conducted on informal mentoring relationships that develop naturally between mentor and protégé. However, it is widely accepted (Feldman, 1999; Wanberg, Welsh & Hezlett, 2003) that there is a dearth of research conducted on the outcomes of formal mentoring relationships and the factors that make facilitated mentoring successful (or unsuccessful, as the case may be). Hence, there are repeated calls amongst the wider community of scholars for empirical research into this area (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh & Hezlett, 2003).

This study looked at a formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme in a community school in South-East Ireland. Blackwater Community School (BCS) is an amalgamated school in Lismore,

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[1] 'The protégé of an older and more experienced person is a young person who is helped and guided by them over a period of time' (Collins UK, 2010). I have chosen to use this term to describe pupils throughout the study as opposed to mentees, as in all cases they are young people being guided and helped by an older mentor.

West Waterford. The school was opened in 2003, following amalgamation of Presentation Lismore, St. Anne's Cappoquin and Christian Brothers Secondary School Lismore. As a learning organisation, the espoused vision of BCS is reflected in the school mission statement:

'Blackwater Community School is Committed to Quality Education'

In 2006, the staff of BCS completed a school development survey, provided by management, which identified key issues that needed to be addressed in the next five years. The need for enhancing academic attainment and improved academic focus was identified as the main priority and has been the declared theme for staff activities and development initiatives ever since. In response to this, the board of management approved the allocation of two special duties posts focused on pupil mentoring. The recipients of these posts were dubbed the junior and senior [the researcher's post] mentoring co-ordinators. Their role began as mentors to all Junior and Leaving Certificate pupils[2] but this has changed drastically since their appointment. Now, a scheme has evolved whereby twenty three staff members (teachers, Principal and Vice-Principal) have taken on the formal role of mentor to two hundred and twenty pupils in the school who are sitting state examinations. Currently these teachers voluntarily select ten to fourteen pupils of their choosing to mentor for the academic year. Meetings, which are compulsory, are scheduled four times during the year over two week 'mentoring rounds' (September, October, January, April) and monitored by the junior/senior mentoring co-ordinators. Progress from the meetings is documented on the pupils' 'mentoring sheets' (Appendix 1), which are part of their pupil journals. After each two week period, the junior and senior mentors have a scheduled meeting with their respective co-ordinators to discuss issues arising and to plan for the next round of mentoring.

This scheme has seen changes in the last three years, but there has been no documented assessment of its outcomes by management or the mentoring coordinators. As the coordinator for senior pupil mentoring, I had a guiding interest in investigating the scheme so as to improve the process for future pupils and mentors. Of particular interest to me was how, and why, the scheme worked (or didn't work, as the case may be) with regards to the mentoring relationships formed between teachers and pupils, the organisation of the scheme and its overall impact on the stakeholders and school. I envisaged that findings around these facets of our formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme would inform my practice, and that of the junior mentoring coordinator, for future years. Through an extensive review of the literature, I also found that the body of knowledge based around formal teacher-pupil mentorship in schools is limited and none is of Irish origin. Thus, research into a formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme in Irish second-level education is justified.

The overall aim of this study was to analyse the formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme at Blackwater Community School with a view to assessing the perceived benefits or drawbacks of the scheme. To this end, the following research questions were asked:

1. How can one determine the quality of a formal teacher-pupil mentoring relationship?
2. What constitutes a well organised formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme?
3. How can one determine the perceived impact (if any) of the BCS mentoring scheme on the stakeholders[3] and school?

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[2] Junior Certificate pupils are in their third year of second-level education and typically range in age from fifteen to sixteen years old. Leaving Certificate pupils are in their final year of second level education (fifth or sixth depending on whether they have completed Transition Year) and typically range in age from seventeen to eighteen years old. In these years, the terminal state examinations of Junior and Leaving Certificate are sat in June.

[3] For the purpose of this study, I am defining the stakeholders in the BCS mentoring scheme as voluntary mentors, mentored pupils, the mentoring coordinator and school management. However, I am aware that there are potentially other stakeholders that should be considered (e.g. parents, community, and the rest of the teaching staff).

Formal Mentoring – Global Phenomenon, Common Issues

Organisation, time, support.

Many different organisations across the world have adopted formal mentoring programmes. In business, Bank of America, Marriott International and Charles Schwab Investment Services use formal mentoring programmes to help them attract, retain and develop high performers (Eddy, 2003, in Allen and Eby, 2008). Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies have also adopted formal mentoring schemes (Seibert, 1999). In medicine and nursing, mentoring is utilised in the training of doctors and student nurses (Andrews & Chilton, 2000). Whatever the discipline, there are recommended components for a formal mentoring programme:

- Matching
- Training
- Monitoring
- Evaluating
- Feedback

These are implemented having defined the purpose and goals of the scheme. Arguably, the scheme must also fit in with the organisation's purpose and as such must contribute to organisational development and be part of career planning for the mentors and protégés. One criticism levelled against formal mentoring schemes is that their degrees of formality are inconsistently defined. For example, formal mentoring programme facilitation may involve a single intervention in which the mentor- protégé matches are made and asked to engage one another for an alloted time period, to programmes that require ongoing reports of progress, facilitate group interactions and provide training for protégés (Egan & Song, 2008). In other words, there is a big difference between placing a mentor – protégé list on your door in January and letting the pairs off for a year, and a programme in which a coordinator carefully matches mentors to proteges, arranges routine meetings with mentors and is available for consultation with interested parties throughout the entire process. Empirical evidence of formal mentoring programmes lacks clear distinction between 'loose' formal mentoring schemes and those which are painstakingly organised with careful attention to the detail of the formal elements of the programme. This lack of attention to the specifications of formal mentoring schemes represents a serious limitation in the mentoring literature (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006).

Time is an important issue to consider when organising a formal mentoring scheme. Protégés perceive time invested in the mentoring relationship as well as the duration and frequency of mentoring meetings as indicators of the level of support they receive from their mentors (Nandram, 2003; Cull, 2006), and as such a measure of quality in the mentoring relationship. The issue of availability is also of relevance. Protégés need to feel their mentor will be available to invest time in the relationship, and vice versa. Researchers (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Iriving, Moore, & Hamilton Iriving, 2003) assert that in formal mentoring, one of the biggest problems for mentors and protégés is difficulties in time, scheduling and availiability.

Brian Gay (1994, p.5) argues that 'one of the great strengths of most mentoring programmes is the voluntary commitment of dedicated individuals [mentors]'. Comforting as this is, it would be foolish to think a formal mentoring programme will thrive solely on the efforts and good intentions of its mentors. Organisations are advised to show constant, visible and significant support for the mentors and protégés contributing to the mentoring process. Situations where perceived organisational support for mentoring has been low have been linked to negative attitudes towards the organisation (Billett, 2003; Nettleton & Bray, 2008), lack of generativity and a bad reflection of the mentoring scheme (Parise & Forret, 2008). Support from the organisation can be displayed in terms of reward and recognition for contributions made by mentors and protégés to mentoring. Likewise, support can be reflected in the time allocated by management and facilitators to the mentoring

scheme. In their study on disservice in formal nursing mentorship, Nettleton & Bray (2008) suggested the importance of recognition for mentors and protégés. They argued that the mentoring process should not just be seen as part of the job, but rather as something extra that colleagues offer to the workplace beyond their job description.

Matching.

In spontaneous, informal mentoring relationships, mentor and protégé choose each other so there are no issues related to matching. In a formal mentoring system, however, there is traditionally some method of pairing mentors and protégés. This pairing is thought to impact substantially on the success of the relationship (Hale, 2000, in Cox, 2005). It is thought by some (Armstrong *et al.*, 2002) that matching of mentors and protégés is contradictory to that true spirit of a mentoring relationship and that this relationship should develop in an organic, informal way without forced pairing as part of a scheme. Gay (1994, p.4) stresses the importance of the development of chemistry between mentor and protégé, which he refers to as 'that 'magic' ingredient of a real mentoring relationship'. There are concerns that in a match-made, informal relationship, this chemistry may not be as effectively generated. This is a pertinent issue that needs to be considered when devising formal mentoring schemes.

Impact of formal mentoring for young people.

There are many studies on mentoring and its outcomes, but very little look at why mentoring actually 'works'. This idea is mirrored by Bearman *et al.* (in Baranik, Roling, Eby, 2009, p.1), who assert that 'the lack of attention given to examining why mentoring works represents a significant gap in the literature since in the absence of this information it is difficult, if not impossible, to build comprehensive causal models of the mentoring process'. However, in the case of youth and academic mentoring, there are a number of documented outcomes worthy of note. In youth mentoring, specific outcomes include positive social relationships, higher performance and less problem behaviour (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005, amongst others). Initiatives that have produced such outcomes include Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS), Career Beginnings, Project RAISE and Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS). These American-based programmes all involve the recruitment of adults to mentor youths of ages 5 – 18 from a diverse range of backgrounds. Though difficult to attribute to mentoring alone, youths in these programmes have shown (Sipe, 2002) better school attendance and better grades than their non-mentored counterparts, as well as the outcomes specified above. Of notable interest is the work of Tierney, Grossman, & Resch (1995) on the impact of the BBBS programme, which conclusively showed that mentored youths feel more competent in their abilities to do well in school, reflected in them receiving slightly higher grades than non-mentored individuals.

Over the last fifteen years in the United Kingdom (UK), mentoring has been used as a means of attracting people from business and the community to schools to aid in the development of pupils. Education-business partnerships such as Compact and the Roots and Wings Initiative have developed and are perceived as fundamental in the introduction and co-ordination of formal mentoring schemes. These schemes vary in their degrees of formality and include mentoring one-to-one, in small groups or a combination of both. In their work on Compact schools, Beattie & Holden (1994) assert that 'the particular context and characteristics of each school will influence the growth and development of the scheme'. Whilst this may be true, Miller (1999) has identified some common objectives of pupil mentoring schemes:

- Increasing confidence and self-esteem
- Improving motivation to learn
- Improving personal and social skills
- Improving employability skills

Methodology

A mixed methods mode of research was adopted for this study, with particular emphasis on the use of a concurrent triangulation strategy (Creswell, 2009), i.e. both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and compared to identify convergences or differences. Questionnaires, a pupil focus group and interviews with the junior mentoring coordinator and Principal were the main research instruments. In the questionnaires and subsequent focus groups and interviews, the participants' attitudes and opinions towards their mentoring relationships, the organisation of the mentoring scheme and the impact of the scheme were investigated in keeping with the overall research questions for the study. Topics within these questions were framed following an extensive review of the literature on formal mentorship and included:
- Development of the mentor-protégé relationship
- Matching of mentors with protégés
- Time, availability and commitment
- Impact on pupils' academic performance
- Impact on pupils' confidence and motivation to learn

Stakeholders were surveyed by questionnaire to ascertain their attitudes and opinions towards the 2009/10 BCS mentoring scheme. The questionnaires took a semi-structured format; the overall questions consisting of:

- A matrix-style list of comments to which participants had to respond on a five-point Likert scale.
- Open-ended questions to which participants were asked to give a qualitative response.
- Individual statements to which participants had to give a response ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', as well as space for an open-ended response.

The mentor and pupil questionnaires contained a number of similar questions, comments and statements. These were included to allow for comparative analysis between the attitudes and opinions of mentors and their protégés on various issues related to the research questions.

Next, a semi-structured focus group was held with six pupils (three Junior and three Leaving Certificate pupils) to gain further information about their experiences as mentored pupils. Following discussion with a critical friend, it was decided to purposively select focus group participants based on the depth of their questionnaire responses, both positive and negative. Preference was given to those respondents who contributed more in the open-ended questions. Based on this criterion, the critical friend then picked the focus group participants without my assistance to prevent researcher bias in selecting the sample.

To finish the data gathering process and for completeness, the junior mentoring coordinator and Principal were met for one-to-one interviews. Hierarchical focusing (Tomlinson, 1989) was adopted in these interviews; initial access questions were posed and followed up in non-directive fashion facilitating respondents' expansion of their expressed opinions. Hence, the first question asked was broad, i.e. *"are there any aspects of the mentoring scheme that you would like to comment on?"*. Sub questions were only raised if the respondent did not freely raise them. These were followed up with prompts for further responses where necessary. A list of sub questions and prompts were prepared prior to the scheduled interviews and practiced with a critical friend, allowing for refinement of clarity and management of the question schedule.

Profile of respondent cohorts.

There were a total of twenty three voluntary mentors in the 2009/10 BCS mentoring scheme, consisting of eleven senior and twelve junior mentors. Three senior mentors were used to pilot the questionnaire and for reasons of validity and reliability were excluded from the rest of the study. Given that I am also a senior mentor, this left seven senior mentors as respondents and the full cohort of twelve junior mentors. The profile of the voluntary mentors, in terms of gender and number of years teaching service, is as follows:
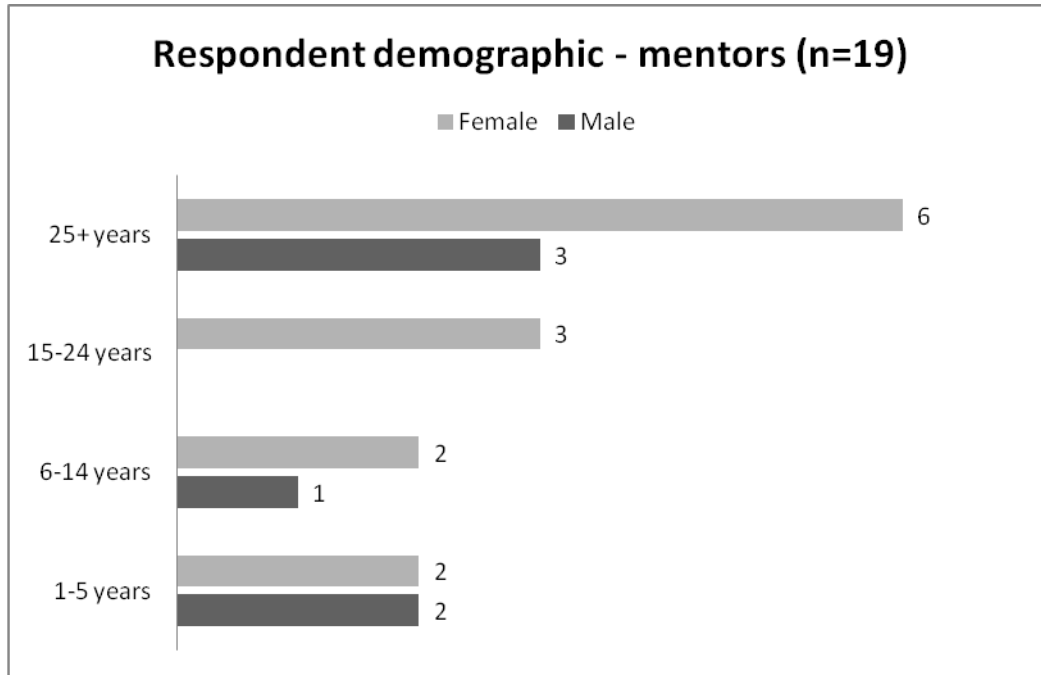

Figure 1 - Respondent demographic of mentors

All 19 available respondents completed and returned the questionnaire, giving a 100% response rate. There are a total of 111 third year and 109 sixth year pupils involved in the mentoring scheme. Of these, three from each year were used to pilot the questionnaire and have been excluded from the rest of the study. This left a potential 108 third year and 106 sixth year participants. The response rates were as follows:

Third years – 92 respondents out of 108, giving an 85% response rate

Sixth years – 78 respondents out of 106, giving a 74% response rate

Overall – 170 respondents out of 214, giving an overall 79% response rate for the study

Junior and senior respondent profiles, according to gender, are illustrated in Figure 2.
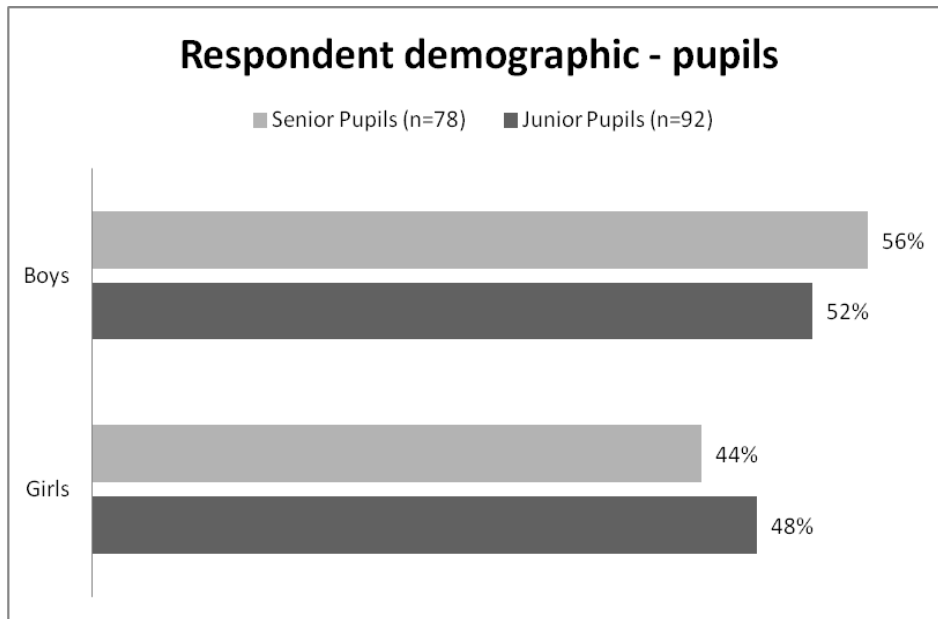
Figure 2 - Respondent demographic of pupils

Findings

Quantitative and qualitative findings from the questionnaires and focus groups were analysed to ascertain commonalities and differences in the attitudes and opinions of the various stakeholders towards the mentoring scheme. Data is presented from the following sources:

Matrix statement analysis:
Quantitative findings from the mentor and pupil questionnaires are represented in Tables 1, 3 and 5; where necessary, alternate pupil statements are bracketed and in **bold**. Participants were asked to rate their responses to a list of statements related to the mentoring scheme on a five-point Likert scale ranging from:
1 = Strongly dissatisfied
2 = Dissatisfied
3 = Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4 = Satisfied
5 = Strongly satisfied

Total amount of responses under each number of the scale were recorded and overall mean scores for participants to each statement was calculated. Because I am an advocate of the mentoring scheme, I chose to adopt a statistical approach biased against my conjecture and categorised mean values of less than 3.0 to constitute a negative response. Standard deviations, which may have suggested a positive outcome for below 3.0, were ignored. Also, any significant figures after the decimal place were rounded down. Positive responses were defined as having a mean response of 3.7 and above.

Individual statements analysis.
Pupils and mentors were given a list of statements in their questionnaires, to which they had to rate their responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Pupil and mentor responses are expressed as a percentage of the total respondent cohort. Findings of interest are listed in Tables 2, 4

and 6. In light of the research questions asked, significant findings are presented relative to the mentoring relationship, organisation and the impact of the scheme.

Statement	Overall mentor mean (n =19)	Overall senior pupil mean (n=78)	Overall junior pupil mean (n= 92)
My level of commitment to the mentoring scheme (**Pupils – the level of commitment of my mentor to the mentoring scheme**)	4.3	3.9	3.8
How easy my mentor was to get on with	N/A	4.2	4
How much my mentor was willing to help me	N/A	3.9	3.7
How well my mentor listened to me	N/A	4.1	3.7
How well my mentor was able to put him/herself in my shoes	N/A	4	2.9
The availability of my mentor when I needed him/her	N/A	3.7	3.4
How much my mentor helped me with choices for my future	N/A	3.7	2.8

Table 1 – Matrix statement analysis (quality in the mentoring relationship.

Both mentors and pupils are satisfied with their levels of commitment to the mentoring scheme. The pupils were satisfied that their mentors were easy to get on with, listened to them and were willing to help them. The junior pupils expressed less satisfaction with the level of mentor empathy shown ('how well my mentors was able to put him/herself in my shoes, mean = 2.9) and with the extent to which mentors helped them with future choices (mean = 2.8).These findings are notably different to the senior pupil mean (4 and 3.7 respectively).

Junior and senior pupils agreed that they have developed a positive relationship with their mentors, with over 60% of junior pupils and 70% of senior pupils agreeing with this statement. A contrasting question was not included on the mentor questionnaire and represents an oversight in the data collection. Mentors identified a number of factors that they felt contributed towards effective mentoring and the quality of the mentoring relationship. Over 70% of mentors agreed that both they and the pupils needed to agree from the outset what they wanted to get out of the relationship. Mentors also identified teaching about goal setting (85% agree), time management (89% agree) and study skills (90% agree) as important parts of their mentoring.

	Statement	Respondents	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pupil responses	'I have developed a positive relationship with my mentor'	Junior pupils (n=92)	3%	8%	29%	48%	12%
		Senior pupils (n=78)	1%	4%	19%	63%	13%
Mentor responses	'Teaching pupils about study skills was an important part of my mentoring'	Mentors (n=19)	0%	5%	5%	47%	43%
	'It was important for me and the pupils to agree from the outset what we wanted to get out of the mentoring relationship'	Mentors (n=19)	0%	5%	16%	37%	42%
	'Teaching pupils about goal setting was an important part of my mentoring'	Mentors (n=19)	0%	5%	10%	32%	53%
	'Teaching pupils about time management was an important part of my mentoring'	Mentors (n=19)	0%	0%	11%	63%	26%

Table 2 – Individual statement analysis (quality in the mentoring relationship)

Statement	Overall mentor mean (n = 19)	Overall senior pupil mean (n =78)	Overall junior pupil mean (n = 92)
The level of support I received from the mentoring co-ordinators	4.5	3.8	3.3
The design of the mentoring sheet in my journal	N/A	3.8	3.7
Being able to pick my own pupils to mentor (**Pupils – how well I was matched with my mentor**)	4	2.9	2.8
That my decision to be a mentor was entirely voluntary (**Pupils – that I did not have a say in taking part in mentoring**)	4.7	3.5	2.8
The extent to which the mentoring scheme was reviewed and evaluated by the mentoring co-ordinators	4.5	N/A	N/A
My overall opinion of the organisation of the mentoring scheme	4.5	3.6	3.4
The amount of scheduled meeting time I had with other mentors during the year	3.3	N/A	N/A

Table 3 – Matrix statement analysis (organisation of the scheme)

The most negative response from mentors was in relation to the amount of scheduled meeting time they had with other mentors; an overall mean of 3.3 indicates dissatisfaction with this statement. However, they were very satisfied with the level of support they received from the mentoring coordinators, the extent to which the scheme was monitored and evaluated by the coordinators and with the overall organisation of the scheme (mean = 4.5 in all cases). Pupils were slightly satisfied with the organisation of the scheme and the level of support they received from the coordinators but were more satisfied with the design of their mentoring sheets (senior mean = 3.8, junior mean = 3.7). In relation to choice, mentors expressed satisfaction with the scheme being voluntary whilst pupils

expressed dissatisfaction with their lack of choice. They were also less than satisfied with how well they were matched with their mentor, whilst mentors were satisfied with being able to pick their own pupils (mean = 4).

	Statement	Respondents	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pupil responses	'Pupils should be allowed to pick their own mentors'	Junior pupils (n=92)	10%	19%	21%	35%	15%
		Senior pupils (n=78)	8%	28%	18%	36%	10%
	'Pupil participation in mentoring at BCS should be voluntary'	Junior pupils (n=92)	8%	37%	12%	30%	13%
		Senior pupils (n=78)	13%	37%	18%	20%	12%
Mentor responses	'It was difficult to schedule meeting times with the pupils I mentored'	Mentors (n=19)	5%	32%	11%	26%	26%
	'Pupil participation in mentoring at BCS should be voluntary'	Mentors (n=19)	68%	11%	0%	5%	16%
	'I would like to have had a day of training on mentoring'	Mentors (n=19)	5%	11%	26%	37%	21%
	'I have received a lot of reward and recognition from my mentoring coordinator'	Mentors (n=19)	5%	11%	5%	29%	50%
	'Pupils should be allowed to pick their own mentors'	Mentors (n=19)	21%	32%	42%	5%	0%

Table 4 – Individual statement analysis (organisation of the scheme)

The findings in Table 4 suggest mixed pupil views on whether they should be allowed to pick their mentors or not, with similar mixed views on whether the scheme should be voluntary. Mentors, however, disagree with the scheme being voluntary (79% disagree) and over 50% disagree with pupils picking their own mentors. In terms of organisation, mentors again identified issues in relation to time and 60% would like to receive mentor training.

Statement	Overall mentor mean (n = 19)	Overall senior pupil mean (n =78)	Overall junior pupil mean (n = 92)
The extent to which mentoring has helped the school understand the needs of our state exam pupils	4	N/A	N/A
My overall satisfaction with the mentoring scheme	4.1	3.7	3.5
The extent to which I have benefited from being a mentor	4.3	N/A	N/A
The extent to which mentoring has helped improve my exam performance	N/A	3.3	2.9

Table 5 - matrix statement analysis (impact of the scheme)

All respondents express some level of satisfaction with the mentoring scheme, with the mentors most satisfied (mean=4.1). Mentors also feel that they have benefited from being a mentor (mean = 4.3) and that the scheme has helped the school to understand the needs of their state exam pupils (mean = 4). Senior pupils are slightly satisfied that mentoring has helped to improve their exam performance (mean = 3.3), whilst junior pupils are slightly dissatisfied with this statement (mean = 2.9).

	Statement	Respondents	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pupil responses	'Being mentored has encouraged me to do better in school'	Junior pupils (n=92)	2%	12%	33%	34%	19%
		Senior pupils (n=78)	6%	16%	26%	46%	6%
	'Being mentored has made no difference to my attitudes towards the school'	Junior pupils (n=92)	6%	38%	22%	25%	9%
		Senior pupils (n=78)	11%	44%	20%	19%	6%
	'Being mentored has had no impact on my motivation to learn'	Junior pupils (n=92)	11%	40%	25%	18%	6%
Mentor responses	'The mentoring scheme has helped us understand the needs of the pupils at our school'	Mentors (n=19)	0%	11%	16%	37%	32%

Table 6 – individual statement analysis (impact of the scheme)

Whilst not identifying mentoring as directly improving their exam performance, over 50% of junior and senior pupils do agree that it has encouraged them to do better in school and disagree that it hasn't had an impact on their motivation to learn. They also disagree (44% of junior pupils disagree, 55% of senior pupils) that mentoring has made no difference to their attitudes towards the school.

The questions asked across the research instruments, along with the dominant themes identified, are presented in Table 7.

Question	Mentor questionnaire responses (n = 19)		Pupil questionnaire responses (n = 170)		Consensus opinions from focus group (n = 6)	
Aspects of the mentoring scheme you are happy with?	1.	Organisation and support from the mentoring coordinators	1.	Development of a positive relationship with teachers outside the classroom	1.	Developing a positive relationship with mentors
	2.	Monitoring of progress valued and appreciated by pupils	2.	Support and one-to-one advice from a mentor	2.	Setting goals
	3.	Development of a positive relationship with pupils outside the classroom	3.	Getting the chance to talk about grades and set goals		
Aspects of the mentoring scheme you are unhappy with?	1.	Lack of time to meet other mentors	1.	Lack of time – meetings too infrequent and are longer for some pupils than others	1.	Not enough contact time with the mentor
	2.	Lack of time in pupil meetings	2.	Lack of pupil choice in partaking or mentor selection	2.	Lack of pupil choice

Table 7 – Qualitative analysis across research instruments

Qualitative analysis across research instruments:

Two common open-ended questions were asked in the questionnaires and focus groups. Answers from the questionnaires were collated to identify recurring themes. A critical friend made the final judgment call on ambiguous comments to prevent researcher bias in the final analysis. In the focus group, consensus opinions (i.e. more than four of the group members agreeing) were documented and clarified with a critical friend, who again had the final call. Whilst this meant that dissenting opinions in the group were ignored, this approach prevented me from being selective with such opinions and thus prejudicing the analysis.

Excerpts of comments from respondents:
Where necessary, excerpts of comments reflecting the popular opinions of pupils, mentors, the junior mentoring coordinator and the Principal are provided to enrich the discussion of the findings. Again, comments were selected by a critical friend in order to prevent selectivity on my behalf.

Discussion

Quality of the mentoring relationship.

Pupils and mentors identified the development of positive relationships with each other as one of the greatest perceived benefits of the mentoring scheme. Pupil responses suggest they value a mentor who is easy to get on with, is willing to help them and listen to them and to offer support and one-to-one advice. Qualitative findings from Table 7 also suggest that mentors and pupils enjoyed the mentoring relationship outside the classroom setting. Mentors identified a number of key elements of mentoring which may contribute to the effectiveness of meetings and overall quality such as teaching pupils about time management, goal setting and study skills and agreeing from the outset what each party wanted to get out of the mentoring relationship. The junior mentoring coordinator believes that beyond offering guidance and support, the ability of mentors to help pupils focus and set short-term goals was very valuable:

They [pupils] have learned that small steps lead to improved results, and that if you have a person there watching and guiding you that it does help you to improve. I think that rather than being told 'you need to do better for your Junior Cert' they are shown how to focus on some key areas and set goals in the short term. (Junior mentoring coordinator – interview)

The evidence points towards a strong rapport between mentors and their protégés. *Contra* to the view that 'forced pairing violates the true spirit of mentoring' (Armstrong *et al.*, 2002, p.112), the stakeholders in this scheme seem to demonstrate great satisfaction with the relationships developed from their mentorship pairings. Cox (2005) highlights the difficulties in building rapport in mentoring schemes that require matching. One could argue that in education, generation of rapport in a matched mentoring relationship is accelerated as a result of the pre-existing teacher-pupil relationship, contributing a degree of casualness and informality to an otherwise formal scheme. The Principal highlighted this benefit of the scheme:

> *The most important thing is that it created an opportunity to have a casual, relaxed encounter with a pupil. It let them open up to say things; [..] more things are arising from the meetings that are pastoral in nature and related to their welfare.*(Principal - interview)

Junior pupils were less satisfied with the level of empathy shown by their mentors and their ability to help with future choices. A possible explanation for this is age. It could be that as pupils get older (Leaving Certificate), the social distance between mentor and protégé is decreased and the personality aspects of the relationship are different. It may be that older pupils feel mentors are more empathetic as the need to recognise compassion and empathy in their mentors is more important; they may feel more valued in being treated as adults whose trials and tribulations as exam pupils and young men/women are understood. With junior pupils, there may be a different dynamic as there is a marked social distance from the teacher, leading to a greater power differential. A comment from a pupil in the focus group, who had experienced both junior and senior mentoring, is suggestive of this heightened awareness of empathy in a senior pupil and hints at their view of what mentoring means to a junior pupil :

> *My mentor really appreciates how hard it is for a Leaving Cert. In Junior cert my mentor concentrated on my grades; in Leaving Cert my mentor is concentrating on me.* (Senior Pupil 1 – focus group)

Organisation.

Time and availability.
The literature (Eby & Lockwood, 2005, Irving *et al.,* 2003) shows that formal mentoring schemes can encounter difficulties with time, scheduling and availability. This was implied across all the findings

from the various research instruments in this study. Pupils were dissatisfied with the lack of mentoring time they received. They felt that meetings were not frequent enough and too short, and were also unhappy with the lack of consistency in the length of meetings. These opinions were aptly reflected by a junior pupil in the focus group:

> *Not enough time in meetings is a big one, because depending on who your mentor is you could get five or fifteen minutes, and the meetings are not often enough.* (Junior Pupil 1 – focus group)

Mentors were also dissatisfied with the time difficulties they faced in mentoring pupils over the two-week mentoring round, particularly at busy times in the school year. The junior mentoring coordinator highlighted this concern:

> *I think we haven't enough time at all. I found this last term very hard in particular. The timetabling of meetings has definitely improved it but I think teachers are finding it hard to locate the kids and mentor them over the two week session.* (Junior mentoring coordinator - interview)

Length of mentoring meetings, availability of mentors and frequency of meetings were highlighted as negative aspects of formal mentoring at BCS. However, this does not suggest lack in commitment from mentors and pupils. On the contrary, the findings imply that both mentor and pupil commitment was high. It seems the scheme's effectiveness may be reduced not by lack of commitment, but rather the abruptness of meetings, the shortness of the mentoring rounds and perceived lack of time on the mentors' behalf, especially at busy times in the year and within a two-week window. As advised by Egan & Song (2008, p.359), 'a fast-paced, minimalist approach to formal mentoring may not be most effective'. The findings from this study imply that too much emphasis may have been placed on the structuring of the mentoring scheme at the cost of quality time. In offering suggestions on how to change the mentoring scheme for the future, some pupils suggested having longer meetings at more significant times in the year, such as before and after pre-Leaving and Junior Certificate examinations. A number of mentors also proposed that the mentoring rounds be extended to three weeks to allow for longer, more spaced out meetings. Given the findings from this study, these changes could have a positive impact in the future.

Choice.

The main issues addressed in terms of choice relate to whether the scheme should be voluntary and if pupils should have a say in picking their mentor, which at the moment they don't. Mentors argued that if the scheme was voluntary, pupils who need it most may miss out on an important opportunity:

> *If this was the case the students who need the help in focusing them for the exams would slip through the net. I hope this would not happen'* (Senior mentor - questionnaire comment)

Pupils expressed dissatisfaction with not being able to pick their mentors and felt they were poorly matched with the mentors they had. This finding contradicts the pupils' views that they developed positive relationships with their mentors and that they were easy to get on with, and as such has to be seen in the light of pupil dissatisfaction with lack of choice coming into the mentoring scheme at the start and not the relationship with the mentor. It also represents a limitation in the questionnaire design as this statement is possibly open for misinterpretation.

These contrasting findings on matching support the argument that mentor input into the matching process is beneficial in formal mentoring (Allen, Eby & Lentz, 2006), but that there is a need to bring the pupils on board more in the area of choice. Having a say in their choice of mentor could lead to greater ownership of the scheme by the pupils, as reflected by the following comment:

> *Even if you don't get your mentor it would be nice to know that you had a say in it. We were just told 'that's your mentor' and that was it, we deserve a say.* (Junior Pupil 2 – focus group)

Whilst allowing pupils to pick between teachers for mentors could prove an inimical suggestion, it could have value insofar as pupils would feel more comfortable and open with a mentor that they have chosen and will thus gain more from the relationship:

> *I would have thought having the choice of teachers would be really important because if a teacher is chosen for you and you don't get on with the teacher then you mightn't want to share your thoughts on your subjects and career choices. I'd more likely to want to talk to someone that I'd picked; I could be more open with them I think.* (Senior Pupil 2 – focus group)

Mentor support.

In constant cognisance of my position as both coordinator and researcher of the senior mentoring scheme, I now offer a reflexive discussion on mentor and pupil perceptions of the role played by myself and the junior coordinator in supporting them throughout the year. Mentors expressed satisfaction with the role played by the coordinators in the scheme in monitoring, evaluating and reviewing and recognising/rewarding their hard work. They did stress, however, that they would like to have had a day of training. It would be interesting (from both an academic and personal perspective) to further inquire as to what makes voluntary mentors happy within their role so as to inform future practice of mentoring coordinators, as well as what would constitute good training for a teacher mentor. Pupils were less satisfied with the level of support they received from the mentoring coordinators. Discussions in the focus group suggested that pupils were not aware the scheme had coordinators. This has future implications for the extent to which pupils are communicated with on the functioning of the mentoring scheme, which again could help to improve pupil ownership of the process.

Perceived Impact of the Scheme

Satisfaction with mentoring.

Findings suggest that mentors have an overall high level of satisfaction with the mentoring scheme and that they have benefited from being a mentor. The possible benefits for the mentor, such as development of a positive relationship with a pupil outside the classroom, as well as reward and recognition from a coordinator, have been discussed. Mentors were also happy with the fact that the special attention they gave to monitoring progress of pupils was valued and appreciated. The Principal further hints at the mentors' enjoyment from being seen in a different light by pupils outside the classroom:

I think a number of them [mentors] were chuffed by the fact that the pupils had an opportunity to see them in a slightly different way. I think they also liked the idea of taking a personal interest in the progress of the pupils. I don't know would they say that, but I felt this to be the case. I think some of them really seemed to get a 'kick' out of it. (Principal - interview)

It is interesting to note that for all findings and indeed from qualitative feedback throughout the research process, junior pupils have an overall lower level of satisfaction with the mentoring scheme. Though not all the findings constitute negative comments, one does have to ask why they are less enthused about mentoring than their senior counterparts. Perhaps mentoring does not mean the same thing for junior pupils because they are still developing as adolescents and as learners? As seniors, are pupils reaching maturity in both of these senses and so more receptive to mentoring? As previously discussed, is the wider social and power differential a mitigating factor in their lower levels of satisfaction? Or is it, as senior pupil 1 noted, 'all about grades' for a junior pupil? These areas would be worthy of further investigation.

Motivation and attitude.

Although pupils do not directly perceive mentoring as helping to improve their exam performance a large proportion agree that mentoring has encouraged them to do better in school and has improved their motivation to learn. These findings mirror those from Miller (1999) and the BBBS programme (Tierney *et al.*, 1995), as well as Hylan and Postlethwaite's (1998) research on teacher-pupil mentorship aimed at raising achievement standards. Pupils in this study attributed these changes to wanting to please their mentors, as reflected by the following questionnaire comments: "*You would be eager to have good grades to show the mentor at the next meeting*" and "*I think it's fairly intimidating if you're talking to your mentor and haven't done well in a test*".

It would be valuable to deeply explore the measurable outputs of formal teacher-pupil mentorship against perceived outputs related to motivation. Analogous to business mentoring as a means of attracting high performers (Eddy, 2003, in Allen and Eby, 2008), a tangible link between formal teacher-pupil mentoring and improvement in exam performance could make schools offering such a service an attractive prospect for high performing pupils.

As well as reflecting the findings in the literature on improved pupil attitudes to work (Hylan and Postlethwaite, 1998), this study also identified a change in pupil attitudes towards the school as a result of being mentored. Questionnaire comments identify the pupils' appreciation for mentors helping them voluntarily as the main reason for their changed attitudes: "*I believe now that teachers are more involved and available to help us more due to mentoring which would change my attitude*" and "*I think the mentoring programme showed the 3rd and 6th years that the teachers were interested in them, which is important.*"

It is possible that this level of appreciation shown by pupils is the reason why mentors seemed to 'get a kick out of it', as the Principal surmised, but unfortunately it was beyond the scope of this study to pursue this line of inquiry. Could the development of positive attitudes in protégés lead to intrinsic satisfaction for mentors, as has been found in business models of mentoring (Parise & Forrett, 2008; Lennox Terrion, Philion, & Leonard, 2007)? Of course, a detailed study into the intrinsic benefits of teacher-pupil mentorship for the teacher would be a worthy contribution to the body of knowledge in this area.

Mentoring as cultural capital.

Mentors feel that the scheme has helped the school to understand the needs of the pupils. The Principal and junior mentoring coordinator have identified pupil needs at both a pastoral and academic level that have been revealed as a result of mentoring. The scheme has helped to identify pupils who were having problems either in or outside school which may only be addressed in one-to-one situations. Singh *et al.* (2002) outline how properly conducted formal mentoring can lead to the transmission of knowledge through the cultural network and the development of cultural capital. It is possible that the knowledge gained both on a pastoral and academic level about the scheme could be transmitted back to various parties in an aim to improve the situation for pupils.

Conclusion

There seems to be consensus that formal teacher-pupil mentoring is of benefit to BCS. The possible benefits include development of positive relationships within the mentor-protégé dyad, which this study argues are enhanced in education due to the pre-existing teacher-pupil relationship. Pupils have shown increased confidence and motivation to learn that in the future could parlay into improved academic performance, thereby satisfying the initial purpose of the scheme. Pupils have also shown enhanced attitudes towards the school, primarily borne out of appreciation for the mentors' voluntary participation. The scheme has contributed to organisational development by serving as a knowledge-

producing tool for the school community, enhancing the educational experience on a pastoral and academic level.

There are also a number of perceived drawbacks of the scheme which, for the most part, are related to organisation. Of most significance seems to be the lack of time for effective mentoring to take place in meetings, as well as issues related to choice, scheduling of meetings and availability of mentors. Reduced satisfaction amongst junior protégés with the levels of mentor empathy is possibly reflective of the greater social and power differential between these pupils and their teachers.

Conscious of the limitations in the literature on formal-teacher mentorship, and for completeness, I offer that the BCS mentoring scheme has a high degree of formality in terms of well-defined communications structures (mentoring sheets, scheduled mentoring rounds and mentor's meetings), two recognised coordinators and measures taken by these coordinators to monitor and evaluate the scheme which seem to please the mentors involved. This study recommends that less emphasis on the structure of the scheme, coupled with greater time investment from pupils and mentors at more strategic points in the academic calendar (before/after pre examinations, for example) would benefit the scheme going forward. Given the high level of pupil and mentor commitment, this recommendation is more than achievable.

In concluding, whilst this study may not provide definitive evidence as to why mentoring 'works' I believe it has helped to identify key factors evident at BCS that could contribute to the success of formal teacher-pupil mentorship such as

- Enhancing the quality of the mentoring relationship by emphasising goal-setting, time management and study skills in mentoring meetings whilst also devoting time to tend to the pastoral needs of the pupil in a casual, relaxed environment

- High levels of organisation – a coordinator in charge of the process who will constantly monitor the progress of the scheme and recognise/ reward the voluntary work of mentors; an emphasis on investing more time in mentoring meetings over longer periods throughout the year and a scheme which is owned by both mentors and pupils

- Remembering what a pupil values most in a mentor – that they are empathetic, supportive, listen, are easy to get on with and are willing to help.

Formal teacher-pupil mentorship is an under-researched area, both in Irish and international education. Potential links between social distance, power differential and level of satisfaction of younger people with a teacher mentor merits further research. Should one take a different approach to mentoring a 14-16 year old than a 17-18 year old? There are other issues not addressed in this article that are worthy of investigation. For example, what constitutes good training for teachers as mentors? Does the model espoused by Miller (1999) for formal mentoring schemes fit in second level education? And if so, is it possible to establish a set of practical guidelines for managers of such schemes on matching, training, monitoring, evaluating and feedback? What other factors contribute to the quality of a mentoring relationship between teacher and pupil? Can one build a causal model for why formal teacher-pupil mentoring works or doesn't work, as the case may be? How far can business models of mentoring usefully transfer into the school context in terms of the quality of the mentoring relationship, organisation and impact of the scheme? Contributions to the body of knowledge on these topics would be of great value to pupils, teachers and school communities.

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Appendix 1

Senior Mentoring Sheet

Student's Name_____ Mentor's Name: _____

Subject								
Points								

Career Choice: _____   **Points required:** ☐

Course 1: _____ Points Required: ☐

Course 2: _____ Points Required: ☐

Course 3: _____ Points Required: ☐

Course 4: _____ Points Required: ☐

Current Points

☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Date: _____   _____   _____   _____   _____