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Title: Buddy Up! Student mentoring in a social work undergraduate programme

Abstract

This article reports on the findings of a collaborative research project conducted by student researchers and academic staff members, exploring the buddying (peer mentoring) scheme in an undergraduate social work programme in England contextualised using Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). Volunteer student mentors are assigned a group of students in the year below to mentor individually throughout their social work degree. During 2019 – 2020, an agreement with local authority partners was reached to enable student buddies who were newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) to continue to mentor during their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE); this is a unique and original feature of this mentoring scheme. Focus groups were used to obtain the views and experiences of students (mentors and mentees). Individual interviews were conducted with NQSWs undertaking their ASYE who continued to act as buddies/mentors for year 3 students. Very little has been written about buddying/mentoring in relation to social work education and this study expands existing knowledge. Findings indicate the value of the mentoring scheme for students and ASYEs, possible pitfalls and important learning points on scheme improvements.

Keywords: Social work, peer mentoring, higher education, Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, student researchers

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Background

Different types of mentoring and configurations

As Crawford, et al (2013) note, the concept of buddying/mentoring as an activity is multifarious. There are many different types of mentoring such as classic (one to one) mentoring, friend to friend mentoring, group mentoring, mentoring across different agencies and professional disciplines, multiple mentors, distance mentoring, peer mentoring and reciprocal mentoring (Loue, 2011; Philip and Hendry, 2000; Philip and Spratt, 2007; Round, 2021). Literature about mentoring emphasises the multiple roles adopted by the mentor which will vary according to the needs of the mentee at any given point and incorporates aspects of personal or pastoral care, coaching, enabling and counselling (Wallace and Gravells, 2007). As Wallace and Gravells (2007) note “...mentoring is primarily about transition – helping someone move from one stage to another” which “...goes deeper than acquiring more knowledge” (pp.15).

Further, definitions of mentoring/buddying tend to emphasise supportive, mutual relationships which contribute to skills or knowledge enhancement of the more junior/less experienced participant with the support of a more experienced mentor (Waddell and Dunn, 2005; Campbell, 2015; McAllister et al, 2009). Reciprocal mentoring, however, does not emphasise a junior/experienced relationship, focusing instead on an approach whereby those involved learn collaboratively in a non-hierarchical bi-directional relationship (Besette, 2015; Boyer, et al., 2004; Round, 2021).

Nonetheless, mentoring in all its guises is supportive, developmental and educative in nature and whilst these facets are reflected in most of the literature about (peer) mentoring, the way mentoring schemes are configured vary significantly. For example, some are short term (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009; Sandner, 2015; Loos and Kim, 2017) and some targeted on identified issues or needs (Roberts and Birmingham, 2017; Mendelsohn, 2002; Lewis, 2018). Similarly, some mentoring relationships are short lived (Topping et al, 2009) but others are longer term (Campbell, 2015). Research also emphasises ingredients for successful

buddying/mentoring schemes. For example, goodness of fit between mentor/mentee expectations (McAllister et al, 2009; Ahn, 2017) and the salience of matching mentees and mentors (McKellar and Kempster, 2017; Roberts and Birmingham, 2017; Katz et al, 2019). McAllister et al (2009) also highlight the importance of a range of different communication methods that are personalised to meet the needs of the mentee. A predictable, planned and defined structure/mode of delivery also appears to be important for successful mentoring schemes (Roberts and Birmingham, 2017; McKellar and Kempster, 2017). Having a project facilitator is also noted by Brooks and Moriarty (2009) and in many of the schemes academic staff are instrumental in establishing mentoring (Campbell, 2015; Sandner, 2015; McKenna and French, 2011; Green, 2018; Bright, 2019). Thus, there is a diverse range of provision of mentoring schemes in higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and there is no fixed way to offer such support.

Buddying in higher education: addressing challenges and benefits for all

It is worth noting that many examples of peer mentoring found in the literature stem from health-based programmes, such as Nursing Studies. The ‘striking’ correlation between social work and nursing was originally highlighted by Beard in 1917. We would argue this also extends to the education of these professions. Indeed, there are many examples of where health and social care are combined in the UK, whether in the literature on professional education (see Doel and Shardlow, 2009) or at government level with the Department for Health and Social Care. Indeed, there is a professional regulator requirement for interprofessional learning (Social Work England, 2021) emphasising the intersection between social work and other professions in contemporary practice. Further, prior to Social Work England becoming the regulatory body for social workers in England in 2019, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), was the regulatory body for social work and a number of other allied health professions and there was a shared set of professional standards for performance, conduct and ethics for all these disciplines (HCPC, 2016). Therefore, in the absence of specific literature on student-buddying in social work education, we have relied on examples found in nursing and other similar programmes of study. We accept that in England and globally these disciplines have distinctly different professional identities, values and codes of practice which may make comparison with English social work problematic, but as helping professions, we feel there is sufficient similarity to justify its inclusion.

Internationally, higher education providers have embraced peer mentoring and there is significant evidence of its use to improve student experiences of higher education, such as how transition experiences into higher education can be facilitated and supported (Campbell, 2015; Geenen et al, 2015; Beltman et al, 2019). Peer mentoring seems helpful in easing the transition for specific student groups and there are a number of international illustrative studies about this. For example, young people with mental health problems who were in foster care in the US (Geenen et al, 2015), Canadian students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Roberts and Birmingham, 2017), students from diverse backgrounds who were the first in the family to attend university in the US (Flores and Estudillo, 2018), international students studying in Australia (Ahn 2017) and doctoral students in the US (Ullrich et al, 2014). Consequently, peer mentoring schemes can demystify the transition, explain course requirements and university processes and thereby reduce worry (Campbell, 2015) and build resilience (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Peer mentoring schemes in higher education can help reduce attrition rates and support student retention (Green, 2018; Lorenzetti et al, 2019; Flores and Estudillo, 2018). In their multi-national systematic review of post-graduate peer mentoring, Lorenzetti et al (2019) identified that mentoring supported retention. Similarly, in the US, peer mentoring increased retention for first generation university BAME students (Flores and Estudillo, 2018). Peer mentors provide unique insights for mentees into their chosen programme of study and are living proof that it is possible to succeed (Topping et al, 1998; McKellar and Kempster, 2017), which can increase student engagement (Campbell, 2015) and bolster mentee confidence (Green, 2018; McKellar and Kempster, 2017).

The flatter power dynamics in a peer mentoring context also enable students to ask questions of their mentors that they would not feel comfortable asking an academic staff member, and which could therefore potentially remain unanswered (Campbell, 2015; Green, 2018; McIntosh et al., 2013; McKellar and Kempster, 2017). Indeed, in Australia, McKenna and French (2011) found that in a peer teaching module, where more senior students taught clinical skills to junior students, mentees felt able to ask questions which provided crucial information about the programme and allayed fears. Further, research also indicates that peer mentoring can improve

academic success and reduce failure rates (Flores and Estudillo, 2018; Sandner, 2015). Lorenzetti et al's (2019) systematic review of postgraduate peer mentoring identified that mentoring enhanced completion rates. Lewis (2018) also argues that peer mentoring may be a strategic method to help students who have failed modules.

The literature also indicates that peer mentoring enhances academic skills and knowledge. For example, Green (2018) and Mendelshon (2002) noted increased motivation for undergraduates. Peer mentoring facilitates understanding of systems, processes and course practicalities such as the library, virtual learning environment, modules (Campbell, 2015), and provide relevant postgraduate knowledge and skill (Katz et al, 2019). Academic skills such as reading, writing and critical thinking were also developed and nurtured by peer mentoring (Flores and Estudillo, 2018; Lorenzetti et al, 2019; Himes and Ravert, 2012). For doctoral candidates, mentoring increased methodological understanding and skill (Lorenzetti et al, 2019), as well as providing additional support for publication outputs (Ullrich et al, 2014). In nursing courses, clinical skills development is also noted (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009).

There is a building body of knowledge about the benefits for mentors. This includes the acquisition of clinical skills for nursing (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009; McKenna and French, 2011), building confidence (McKenna and French, 2011; Reilly 2012), embedding existing learning (Smith et al, 2015; McKenna and French, 2011), attaining new learning and developing leadership skills (Bright, 2019). Mentors are often motivated by the opportunity to "give back" and find mentoring fulfilling (Cropper, 2000; McAllister et al., 2009; Crawford et al, 2013). Indeed, Beltman et al (2019: 50) specifically examine mentor emotions, identifying a "temporal dimension" to mentor reactions. As will be discussed in the following section, many of the perceived mentor benefits are future facing.

Thus, extant evidence indicates that peer mentoring can be of significant value in university education. Mentoring systems offer mentees opportunities to obtain support, enhance engagement, develop academic/clinical skills and more easily negotiate the transition into

higher education. Similarly, mentors also benefit from involvement in such initiatives. Indeed, Bright (2019) concludes that mentoring is a fiscally prudent way to support learning.

Career enabling socialisation, professional identity formation and communities of practice

Vocational programmes have used mentoring to develop professional identities and skills (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009; Bright, 2019; Smith et al, 2015). Inclusion of mentoring within nursing programmes is unsurprising given the post registration requirement of nursing to mentor others (Brook and Moriarty, 2009; Reilly, 2012). Unlike qualified nurses, there is no post-qualification requirement for social workers in England to become Practice Educators (the equivalent of a nursing mentor). Mathews and Develin (2008) identified that social workers in England were motivated by personal factors rather than organisational directives or professional body requirements in their decisions to become practice educators.

Mentoring schemes in nursing programmes provide the opportunity to develop skills and professional identity (Reilly, 2012) required for qualified practice, described by Eraut (1994: 90) as “early socialisation. Being a mentor is beneficial for curriculum vitae (Reilly, 2012) and provides the opportunity to develop insight into the requirements of being a nurse mentor once qualified (Reilly, 2012; McKenna and French, 2011; Smith et al, 2015) . Through demonstrating clinical skills to others, skills are honed in preparation for qualified practice (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009; McKenna and French, 2011) as well as enhancing other skills such as communication and feedback (Bright, 2019; Brooks and Moriarty, 2009), leadership (Reilly, 2012; Bright, 2019) and understanding group dynamics (Bright, 2019; Ahn, 2017). Additionally, by exploring the realities of practice and the demands of studying a professional programme (Green, 2018; Lewis, 2018; McIntosh et al, 2013; McKeever et al, 2018), students become accustomed to professional expectations, norms, demands and obstacles. Similarly, for medical students, Balasooriya et al (2013) report on a peer scheme to develop necessary team working skills for qualified practice.

Peer mentoring on vocational programmes therefore socialises trainees into their chosen profession via the development of an understanding of what it means to be a professional in that discipline. Shared identities and a sense of belongingness are developed (Cropper, 2000; McKellar and Kempster, 2017). Green (2018) expands this further by discussing that their mentoring programme for a learning disability nursing programme developed communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al, 2002) and students were provided with a “gradual introduction to the community” (Green, 2018: 59).

Furthermore, characteristics of effective mentors, perhaps unsurprisingly, include qualities that are imperative for professional practice in social work (Social Work England, undated). These include interpersonal skills such as being able to establish productive working relationships contextualised by acceptance, reliability, responsiveness, openness, warmth, and an appropriate use of power (Roberts and Birmingham, 2017; Green, 2018). Similarly, Smith et al (2015) found that effective mentors demonstrate the ability to critically evaluate and respond to situations, knowing when to “step back” (pp. 494) or be more directive.

Mentoring in social work education

Although (peer) mentoring is used extensively in higher education, its use in social work education is limited. Peer mentoring in the USA has been used to support social work doctoral candidates (Katz et al, 2019; Kusmaul et al, 2019), socialising candidates into academia and developing professional identities through the acquisition of research skills as well as facilitative networks that are important for academic careers (Fangahanel, 2012). Similarly, and also in the USA, (but not peer mentoring), LGBT social work doctoral candidates and newly appointed academics were also offered mentoring (McAllister et al, 2009). More recent mentoring schemes (but not peer based) in the USA include mentoring for women academics to redress disadvantages faced in reaching tenure (Tower et al, 2015) and social work academics in their first year in employment/teaching (Brady and Spencer, 2018).

There are some peer mentoring schemes developed for pre-registration social work programmes. In Australia, Ahn (2017) developed a peer mentoring scheme to support international social work students in the transition to a Masters programme. Like McAllister et al's (2009) study of LGBT doctoral students offering non-peer based mentoring, Ahn (2017) found that mentoring relationships were problematic when there was a lack of goodness of fit of between mentee and mentor expectations. However, Ahn (2017) also noted a cultural element contributing to the discrepancies in approach between mentees and mentors that exacerbated issues of lack of fit. Where peer mentoring relationships worked well, Ahn (2017) reported that these relationships were encouraging and facilitative of mentees and provided mentors with the opportunity to embed their professional learning. Loos and Kim (2017) discuss a mentoring scheme in Australia offered by two newly qualified social workers to students on short hospital-based placements. Like many of the other mentoring programmes in higher education, Loos and Kim (2017) identified that mentees benefitted from someone who had experienced social work training programmes and the encouragement and motivation this provided.

In the UK, there is less research regarding peer mentoring in pre-registration social work programmes and it is old and out of date (Topping et al, 1998; Cropper, 2000) as they pre-date the changes implemented in 2013 to the social work qualifying degrees in England. Nonetheless, they still provide value and insight into how peer mentoring could be used in social work degree programmes. Topping et al (1998) used a peer mentoring programme in their Scottish university during induction week. They identified the stressful nature of social work education and suggested peer mentoring as a way to support new social work students. Benefits for mentees included the opportunity to hear the lived experiences of students who had already completed that level of study and have the chance to inquire about their experiences. Importantly, Topping et al (1998) undertook a national survey of social work training providers approved by CCETSW (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work). CCETSW is now defunct but was responsible for social work training across the four UK nations and was the forerunner of subsequent regulatory bodies/agencies responsible for social work education such as General Social Care Council, The College of Social Work, Health and Care Professions Council (England) and Social Work England. In the survey by Topping et al, (73 responses out of 124 providers at that time), a number (19%)

reported offering peer mentoring in their programmes, which they describe as a “substantial minority” (1998: 54). Cropper (2000), also in a UK university, outlined how using peer mentoring for BAME students was used to facilitate the transition from an access to higher education course to a social work degree. Cropper argued that peer mentoring is one way to provide an anti-racist approach to social work education, which is topical in light of Black Lives Matters highlighting the impact of structural racism.

Despite a significant body of knowledge about the advantages of peer mentoring in higher education, very little has been written that is social work specific, particularly from a UK perspective; this is in spite of the findings of Topping et al (1998) that suggested social work programmes were routinely using peer mentoring. Existing evidence indicates the helpfulness of peer mentoring programmes, but there is a need for more contemporaneous research to enhance our understanding and act as a platform for further discussion, which this article provides.

The undergraduate social work buddying scheme

The social work undergraduate buddying (peer mentoring) scheme, which has been in existence since 2017 at one university in the North East of England, was co-created with students and a social work academic. The idea emerged from attendance by a social work student and a social work academic at a teaching and learning conference. Subsequently, the idea of a buddying scheme was discussed between students and the academic staff member, and a decision taken to establish peer mentoring provision. Students were allocated buddies from the cohort in the year above (e.g. year 1 students were allocated a buddy from year 2 and year 2 students had buddies from year 3) adopting a peer mentoring approach that utilised a traditional mentoring format of more experienced mentor/less experienced mentee although as the findings indicate, the mentors and mentees both benefitted and developed, which is reminiscent of reciprocal mentoring (Pound, 2021). Mentees were randomly assigned a mentor when they commenced year 1 of the programme and because the number of mentors was small, mentors were given groups of students in the year below to mentor on a one to one basis. Initially, the academic lead made the mentor/mentee allocations, but this task was subsequently undertaken by one of

the student mentors to reduce the power dynamics between mentors and the academic staff member. Whilst peer mentoring reduces power differentials (Campbell, 2015) our model of senior mentor/junior mentee could only reduce, not eliminate possible power dynamics.

From 2019, in order to provide buddies for year 3 students, NQSWs in their ASYE who had been buddies were asked whether they could continue to buddy their year 3 students – only 2 were able to do so (although early indications are that this number will increase 2020 onwards). Local authorities in the locality were also consulted and gave their support for NQSWs to continue buddying and include this as evidence for their ASYE; this is a novel aspect of this scheme. The ASYE role is specific to English social work and provides a protected first year in employment where NQSWs consolidate their university learning and provide further evidence of practice capability and have a reduced workload (DfE, 2019).

The buddying scheme was deliberately informal to allow flexibility and creativity although some overarching principles were subsequently developed at the end of the first academic year, with informal appraisals of the system throughout. All buddies were volunteers and participation with the initiative was voluntary for buddies and mentees. The buddying scheme was facilitated by an academic member of staff, with a clear emphasis on collegiate working and sharing responsibility for the establishment and direction of the project.

Communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002) was an underpinning theoretical framework for the buddying scheme because participants share an interest and become “informally bound” (Wenger et al, 2002: 5) in the creation of identity, knowledge and collective understandings and approaches. Communities of practice are inherently social (Wenger, 1998) which is an epistemological and ontological match with social work practice that is relationship based and anchored within communities (IFSW, 2014; Social Work England, undated; Wilson et al, 2011). Wenger (1998) argues that through these social interactions, learning occurs, and identities are shaped, developing a sense of belongingness to that community (i.e. profession). Indeed, Wenger et al (2002: 20) argue that a community of

practice acts as the “home for identity.” Community participants can have differing levels of engagement, including non-participation through to active engagement at the heart of the community (Wenger, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991), which reflects the voluntary levels of participation as mentors and mentees and the varying levels of engagement from both groups. Relationships in communities of practice are reciprocal, developing practice competence, although Wenger (1998) acknowledges that this does not preclude difficult and problematic experiences. Individuals can also have “multi-membership” (Wenger, 1998: 158) of different communities of practice, which was relevant when including the ASYEs who were former students and also NQSWs and traversing both communities of practice. In terms of configuration, communities of practice should not be “over managed” (Wenger et al, 2002: 12) which is commensurate with the buddying scheme’s deliberate informality, but this is re-conceptualised in the discussion section.

Methodology:

This project employed student researchers who worked collaboratively with two academic staff members across the research process. The student researchers and one of the academics were also involved in the undergraduate buddying scheme (the students as buddies/mentees and the academic as scheme facilitator). Therefore an “intimate insider” (Taylor, 2011: 5) methodological position was pertinent; this celebrates researcher closeness to participants and data, with the benefits this can provide whilst simultaneously identifying possible pitfalls. Student researchers, also student buddies/mentees were, positioned as “key social actors” (Taylor, 2011: 9) in the buddying project and the duality of the roles required significant levels of self-awareness. To address possible problems of insider research, this was discussed with the student researchers and supplemented with reading. Further, in data analysis coding cycles, more than one student researcher coded the data in order to avoid “insider blindness” (Taylor, 2011: 13) which also increased trustworthiness (Noble and Smith, 2015).

The research aims were:

1. To explore student (mentee and mentor) perceptions of the social work undergraduate buddying scheme

2. To ascertain the views of being a buddy from NQSWs who continue to mentor year 3 social work students during their first year in practice
3. To use data obtained to develop our buddying scheme

Data were collected during February and March 2020 using focus groups and individual interviews. Year 2 and 3 social work students (n = 5) who were acting as buddies for students in the year below them and who had received support from a buddy were interviewed in 2 focus groups (separated because of availability related to placement commitments). Year 1 social work students (n = 9) who were receiving support/offer of support from a student buddy were interviewed in one focus group. In addition, two NQSWs who continued to act as buddies as part of their ASYE, were interviewed individually. These newly qualified social workers had been in the first cohort of students to act as buddies. Overall, there were 16 participants (5 male and 11 female) involved with the research. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were provided with participant information leaflets and signed a consent form was obtained prior to taking part in the research.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed by the student researchers. For the Year 2/3 focus groups, we were able to identify individual participant contributions and participant and focus group numbers are given. For the year 1 focus group, it was impossible to determine which participant had made which contribution and accordingly, the comments from the Year 1 focus group do not include a participant number.

Project meetings and a Microsoft Teams site (which offered a mechanism to store information, communicate across team members and provide an audit trail) enhanced transparency and dependability (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Baxter and Jack, 2008; Robson, 2002).

Findings

The buddying scheme: roles and support

a) Transition/induction

A range of support was offered to mentees by their mentors. At the outset of the social work degree, input by the mentors was used to facilitate the transition of new social work undergraduate students. This included practical orientation to the campus, key locations and how to use the library as well as offering reassurance about the transition to higher education:

when I first met the buddy I thought she was fantastic, she showed us all around the library I thought that was really beneficial (Year 1, Focus group)

beneficial within the first week especially, to be honest with you. Someone like myself who, I'm an older student, so I haven't been to school for 25 year, ...so it's different coming back into an academic environment especially when the buildings are dotted about everywhere. (Year 1, Focus Group)

Similarly, the importance of the buddying scheme to the initial transition experience was also highlighted by the mentors in years 2/3 and was often a motivation for wanting to become a mentor:

...if I think back to me first day of starting university... I was like a fish out of water... didn't know anybody at all. ...I found that I was asking a lot of questions cos you know coming at university at 44 year old was like a massive, massive thing for me.... and I wouldn't like to think that there's first year students out there who were feeling what I was feeling at the time on my first day (P3, FG1, Year 2/3)

I suppose it was about just making sure that nobody had the same experience as me, in my first year, cos that can be quite a scary time. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3)

b) An “extension of the tutor”

Where the buddying scheme worked well, mentees received regular and sustained support and encouragement from their mentors (although as will be discussed later, this was not a consistent experience for the year 1 students).

My buddy has been fantastic...she's been in touch pretty much every other week and she's been really consistent she offered to meet us whenever she's free and we're free she like, she's been fantastic and she's really helped us. (Year 1 Focus Group)

A constant theme across the data collection was the support mentors could offer to mentees for key professional assessment events within the curriculum during Year 1 such as the Readiness for Practice Portfolio, Assessed Conversation (communication skills assessment) and Court skills (simulated evidence giving). Year 1 students commented on the value of supporting key assessment turning points:

She's done all sorts really she's helped us go through ours portfolios, she's spoke to us about the court skills, she's spoke to us about the essays. Erm, in fact she messaged us about the essays, just as we were starting to actually do them ...when the buddy messaged and said aw look, just calm down, don't worry, you'll be fine, if you need help message me we'll all met up and go through it together. It was the sense of calming everyone down, you know and that was really, it was nice for the group because a lot of people panic. (Year 1, Focus Group)

The year 2/3 students and ASYEs spoke about providing support around these particular assessment events:

The assessed conversation was another big...thing to overcome for the year below and living through it you can give them tips on the conversation and how to keep it keep it going and I think I've had like phone calls outside of normal working hours with my buddies to just reassure them and say you can do this and give them the useful tips to get through it. (P1, FG1, Year 2/3)

This is the portfolio, this is how I've managed to do it so it was a case of some students in 1st year, really didn't understand the portfolio (ASYE1)

Indeed, Year 2/3 students spoke about giving and receiving both emotional support and academic guidance, with explanations about, and translations of, the academic assignment requirements (the ASYEs were the first cohort to act as buddies and consequently had not received this type of support, but had provided it). Mentors drew upon their lived experience of studying on the programme to guide students and avoid pitfalls:

Erm, I also took down a copy of...me portfolio as well cos I thought that was really important... I saw some other students come towards the end of putting the portfolio in and how much they were behind and how much work and effort. So I tried to get my students ahead of the game with that one. (P3, FGI, Year 2/3)

I mean for me, for me given the knowledge of 3rd year students, peppering them up making sure they're doing alright, (ASYE1)

Mentors reported calming anxieties and rising panic about academic work, associated with “pressure points” around the academic commitments of their mentees who needed additional support and advice about assessments to alleviate their worries, but which led to spikes in contact for mentors around these times:

I think time has been a bit of a challenge. Especially...when I was on placement like last year, and deadlines were coming up for the year below. So as they were approaching an assignment deadline or the assessed conversation especially, you'd get an influx of oh my god...can you talk through, can you help me...and you try to manage your work, juggling that, doing a good job yourself and while you're on placement and then offering them reassurance. (P1, FGI – Year 2/3 students)

Support was sometimes provided outside of business hours, giving mentees a crucial source of support at a time they needed it, when academic tutors would be unlikely to respond:

Then I've also had messages from people at 11-12 o'clock at night...I don't know what I'm doing this for, I can't do this anymore, so I give that emotional support, of bringing

them back down, giving a little pep talk, but then there's those pressure points throughout the year, especially when deadlines are approaching, you know, you kind of, not so much put your stuff on the back burner, but you kind of let it simmer a little bit, just while you kind of reel them back in. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3)

In light of this pastoral support, sharing own experiences of completing assessed elements and explaining academic requirements, one mentor (ASYE1) described the role as ***“more like an extension of the tutor.”*** Implicit is the notion of complementarity to what an academic staff member might offer but with increased availability and flexibility.

c) A beacon of hope

By using their lived experiences of the social work degree, mentors were living proof that despite the various demands of a professional programme, it was possible to complete the year and progress to the next, as a year 1 student noted:

security as well, to make you feel like you can achieve to the next year. That support network isn't it (Year 1, Focus Group)

The Year 2/3 student mentors who had also received a support from a mentor also discussed the importance of this encouraging person who provided hope that success was possible:

It is hard but, you can get through it, just, just those words are enough (P2, FG2, Year 2/3)

But then I think it makes it a little more real because, what they year two are going through now, we went through. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3)

As one student commented, this was particularly important for them because they had not expected to have academic success during the programme but seeing the mentor made the likelihood of achievement seem possible:

I just said look I know where youse have been ... I always start back to my first day at uni and how I felt and my progression because I didn't think I was going to make it to 2nd year on my way to 3rd year . (P3, FG1, Year 2/3)

Becoming a professional social worker

With the exception of a single year 1 student, professional expectations and boundaries developed through mentoring were **not** mentioned by the Year 1 students. This may be because many of the students in that focus group had not received consistent support because mentors had disengaged or not persisted with ongoing mentoring provision. However, one student noted that their mentor had discussed professional identity:

she spoke to us about it, she went through a lot about, you know, professionalism and things like that and when we got out shadowing days what to expect. (Year 1 student, Focus Group)

As might be expected, the student mentors in Years 2/3 and the ASYEs had a deeper understanding of how the mentoring scheme had contributed towards the development of their own professional identity. For example, they identified how mentoring had enabled them to practise and refine professional skills, including working collaboratively, developing working relationships, telephone skills, practising helping people, skills in speaking in plain English and providing an array of possible solutions options for support:

It has informed my practice because it's...about you know talking jargon to talk to people on a level and we're going to be using that when we go out in the field talking to people from grassroots level. (P3, FG1, Year 2/3)

Totally, it taught me all about multi-agency and working together and being collaborative. (P2, FG2, Year 2/3)

you're dealing with crisis, you're providing emotional support, you're getting emotional support, so it's very realistic to being...being an actual social worker, even though you're still at university. You're dealing with very similar issues, just in a different setting. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3)

Mentors also noticed that in providing support to other students, they revisited and embedded their own learning and critically appraised their own understanding and development:

It's gonna force us to refresh that aspect of our degree, because it's pretty much almost been a year since we done that, so it's gonna bring all that back to the forefront. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3)

So I wanted like I wanted to remember 1st year information in 3rd year. (ASYE1)

What it actually forces you to do is critically reflect on your own performance whilst doing it. (P2, FG1, Year 2/3)

Not only did the mentoring provide a way to keep learning alive, but it also enabled mentors to practise theoretical approaches. In particular, mentors commented on strengths-based practice and crisis intervention (when mentees were agitated by impending assessments):

we're working with people from you know from crisis point of view in their lives and you can still mirror that with the student buddies when they're having a meltdown over an assignment. (P3, FG1, Year 2/3)

using that strengths-based approach for people to look within them and find their own strengths and apply them to you know overcome any barriers. (P1, FG1; Year 2/3)

The mentors saw how supporting mentees had developed their abilities in relation to the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2021). Mentors explicitly mentioned professionalism, organisational context and leadership and one of the ASYEs also connected this to the Knowledge and Skills Statements (DfE, 2018) required of qualified social workers:

as well as a social worker you've got to be able to be diverse, it's all your ethics your values, your professionalism. It's all being brought in, you know, your organisational context, everything's coming in, your leadership by helping other groups...you've gotta take ownership and responsibility for helping others. (P3, FG1, Year 2/3)

so professional development, you've got your KSS¹ and PCF² and number 9's professional development you literally can tick every box (ASYE1)

The ASYEs also regarded their continued involvement with the buddying scheme as evidence for continuing professional development. One ASYE had felt able to support students on placement because mentoring had built their confidence and consequently was interested in becoming a practice educator or to mentor ASYEs in the future:

I think I'm more likely to go on to become a practice educator. I think it's definitely give me that confidence to be able to almost take people under my wing. I think even going into even in my ASYE now when we have had students from second year in the assessment team...I've been able to go out and take them out with me and go on visits and kind of show them what it's actually like as a social worker...so it has give me that confidence. (ASYE2)

I use a lot of the Buddy Scheme to inform portfolio my ASYE portfolio. (ASYE1)

Importantly for the ASYEs, continuing as mentors enabled them to retain their alumni connection with the university in a meaningful way but additionally, this created a link between ASYE employers and the university. The ASYEs were keen to ensure that students understood the context and realities of contemporary social work practice alongside the expectations of employers:

because this is where we are gonna be getting our newly-qualified social workers from ...that's the important thing for us that's what we need to remain. So we need to have somebody in (university). (ASYE1)

¹ In England, there are post qualifying Knowledge and Skills Statements for social workers in Children and Adult services which outline what social workers in adults or children's services should have knowledge of and what skills they should possess post qualification

² In England, the PCF (Professional Capabilities Framework) provides benchmarks of knowledge, values and skills for social workers at all stages of their career, from student to senior manager

I think preparing them for that actual real life, as oppose to uni. (ASYE2)

It is clear therefore that the buddying scheme provided an important dimension to the development of professional knowledge, skills and identity, broadening out from individuals to cross organisational relationships and communities.

Challenges and improvements:

Despite the many positive aspects of the buddying scheme, some challenges arose. Availability of mentors was an issue across all focus groups and ASYE interviews. For the year 1 students, the lack of mentor availability, including total disengagement by mentors was a particular challenge and to some extent this skewed data. Developing a communities of practice theoretical perspective, this disengagement or opting out from mentors might be deemed as “*illegitimate non- participation*”:

I'm not in their buddy group see mine, the day we joined nothing since absolutely nothing since no text, not an email zilch. (Year 1 student, focus group)

Regrettably, having a negative experience of the buddy scheme because of mentors not being engaged had a detrimental impact on Year 1 students' perceptions of the buddying scheme which dissuaded some of them from considering being a mentor in Year 2:

that's what I'm saying if you going to be a buddy, I would be scared in case I couldn't quite because how it's affected say like XXX, even though I wouldn't because I'd make myself because it hasn't inspired me to become one. (Year 1, Focus Group)

Conversely, one of the Year 1 students felt that the negative experiences had acted as a catalyst for being involved with the buddying scheme to rectify these problems:

I think I would really like to be a buddy, and I think it would be good to put yourself in the shoes of the first years and think well I didn't get that so I'll I'm gonna give my group it. (Year 1, Focus Group)

Similarly, another issue identified was that mentors simply did not have sufficient time available to commit to the mentoring scheme and were pre-occupied with their own personal or academic challenges. This experience of lack of availability was also compounded by year 1 students not wishing to bother their mentor:

I was told she was too busy though she didn't do it in a horrible way at all, she wasn't nasty at all, she really wasn't, she was just honest. (Year 1 student, focus group)

But at the beginning she was absolutely amazing, but then she was overwhelmed, so it was just a case of I don't want to put on her. (Year 1 student, focus group)

From a mentor perspective, the students in years 2 & 3 and the ASYEs identified availability as a challenge, but from a slightly different perspective to year 1 mentees. Mentors (Years 2 & 3) and ASYEs acknowledged the difficulties experienced in finding time to provide mentoring, particularly when on full time placement or during full time employment, reflecting the realities of a professional graduate programme and of qualified social work practice:

With me being a buddy and going into placement, a 70-day placement, my challenge was my buddies contacting me at the point I was on placement and that's what I thought was challenging...was why I tried to arrange everything before the start of placement. (P3, FG1, Year 2/3 student)

I don't answer to my Mentees during the day cos I can't. (ASYE1)

... for me, it's been like I've got my own pressures, and in second year has been quite demanding. (P2, FG2 – Year 2/3 student)

In response to these identified challenges, a consistent theme across mentees and mentors, was the need for increased structure for the scheme. Year 1 mentee suggestions included ideas for a structure in relation to face to face meetings (not operationalised because of Covid-19) and a regular meeting or commitment (which shifted the onus and responsibility onto the mentor):

...basically have a meet up every month I would say, even if it's just for half an hour. (Year 1 Focus Group)

personally I think meet up once a month might be too much, for some buddies especially if they are on placement, a lot of people have got kids, got their own lives...But at the very least, see if they will text once a month, or once every 2 months, just to see how we are getting on to be honest. (Year 1, Focus Group)

The mentors identified the need to formalise the scheme – with mentees being able to opt in to receive a buddy (mentor) to address issues of low take up and sharing mentees across the available mentors. Formalisation of the buddying scheme was also identified in order to have a simple way to collate contact information and clarity about which students wanted and would use a mentor:

...Looking as it as it stands, I think there's probably two things; say firstly it could be if the scheme was more formal. Erm, then I think the take up rate would be people-would only include people that were actually committed to it and you wouldn't have such a high drop out rate. (P2, FG1, Year 2/3 student)

yeah exactly erm but I just think the intake was poor, that was the thing that disappointed me the most, because ...we were like an untapped resource. (ASYE2)

The mentors felt that some further clarification of expectations of mentors and what could be asked of them was required, so that mentors had a clear understanding of what was being expected of them, the parameters of their role and what they should and should not do:

*... I do think there needs to be some formal work around what is the role of a buddy...
(P2, FG1, Year 2/3 student)*

...was there boundaries and procedures in place, so they knew what they were doing, what they, what they'd agreed to help us with...Was it what they had signed on for. (P1, FG2, Year 2/3 student)

We didn't know whether or not we were providing support emotionally or practically and I was doing both. (ASYE 1)

Discussion

Whilst there were some difficulties for the year 1 students with mentors disengaging, overall the buddying/mentoring scheme provided some useful aspects of support for mentees. In the early stages of joining the university, the support offered by mentors eased the transition into higher education which is commensurate with previous research (Beltman et al; 2019; Campbell, 2015; Geenen et al, 2015). In relation to social work specifically, this research supports the limited evidence base about the usefulness of mentoring at the beginning of social work programmes (Ahn, 2017; Topping et al, 1998), but has also augmented the limited existing literature relating to peer mentoring in pre-registration social work training (Topping et al, 1998; Cropper, 2000). Mentees benefitted from support around assignments and key practical assessment events which the existing literature about mentoring in social work programmes does not address. Additionally, the ongoing support from ASYEs has not been researched previously.

Like much of the other literature (Brooks and Moriarty, 2009; Reilly, 2012; McKenna and French, 2011), the findings also support the importance of the mentoring scheme in supporting the development of professional skills, knowledge and identities. Important skills for future

practice such as team working, understanding professional requirements and becoming prepared for practice were developed. In this sense, the mentor role was seen as an “extension of the tutor role”, advising and supporting re: academic work (but from a student insider perspective); allaying fears and anxieties about academic work or the programme (but with availability beyond that of a tutor); and showing that it is possible to pass the programme and go on to qualify.

The evidence from the data also indicates that there has been some success in applying the overarching theoretical framework of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice emphasise the social context for learning and developing professional identity set within collaborative relationships between community members who share common ground whereby those involved “...deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002: 4). Since its inception in 2017, the buddying scheme has provided ongoing support for undergraduate students, extending its provision for ASYEs to continue to support final year students (a novel feature of the programme). The findings indicate less success for year 1 students in facilitating an understanding of professional identity because of the disengagement of the mentors. However, for the students in years 2/3 there is evidence of how being involved with the scheme has developed their social work practitioner identities. For example, by refreshing learning, providing the opportunity to practice transferable skills, evidencing the requirements of the PCF, giving a clear view of employer expectations, and for students and ASYEs to see their continuing professional development in terms of achieving qualified social worker status and future CPD. Although the scheme adopted a traditional mentoring configuration of junior mentee/more experienced mentor, there was evidence of reciprocal mentoring (Bessette, 2015; Boyer, et al., 2004; Round, 2021) and learning from each other. This reciprocity is commensurate with the theoretical framework of communities of practice as community members “...become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together” (Wenger et al, 2002: 5).

In sharing their knowledge of the social work programme and supporting mentees to achieve key assessment events, mentors acted as a “living repository” (Wenger et al, 2002: 9) about the

social work degree within the university and its tacit expectations. Engaging with the programme was optional for mentees, who could choose whether or not to participate, thus supporting the notion of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1998: 11) where being on the outskirts of the community is equally as legitimate as active participation. However, we propose that the disengagement of mentors (who are pivotal to the delivery of the scheme), leads to something we call “*illegitimate non-participation.*” That is, there is no such opportunity to remain on the periphery for mentors and where they disengage, this is contrary to the continuance of the community of practice. Indeed, negative experiences because of the mentor disengagement, had deterred year 1 students from becoming buddies. From this experience, and the feedback about how to improve the buddying scheme, it was clear that further structure was necessary, and the student researchers developed guidance about mentor expectations. Whilst the importance of structure and clarity for mentoring schemes is indicated by other literature (Roberts and Birmingham, 2017; McKellar and Kempster, 2017), this posed a dilemma because communities of practice “should not be second-guessed or over-managed” (Wenger et al, 2002: 12); accordingly, the guidance needed to provide sufficient structure without being prescriptive and allowing for flexibility in how the mentoring support could be offered. Whilst there was seemingly a tension between level of structure and flexibility in relation to communities of practice, it may be argued that the ability to respond to this tension is compatible with Wenger et al’s (2002: 51) notion of “design for evolution.” Responding to the findings from the research enabled us to review and amend our practices which Wenger et al., (2002: 53) describe as an “alive” community which can “...reflect on and re-design elements of themselves throughout their existence.” Further, the notion of structure for a community of practice is evident in Wenger et al’s (2002) considerations on planning and preparing for a community of practice; therefore, it is possible to have both structure and flexibility in this conceptual framework.

By including ASYEs, the mentoring scheme also facilitates “multi-membership” (Lave and Wenger, 1998: 105; 149) of different communities of practice for those who continued to mentor during their first year of qualified practice (university buddying scheme/employment as ASYE). As Lave and Wenger (1998) identify, different individuals need to have identities that are compatible across the different communities that they belong to for multi-membership to be successful. Arguably, this is relatively straightforward as the communities within the

university and employer are focused upon social work practice, its mores, expectations and requirements providing a shared understanding and vision across these communities. For all those students who were or who had been on placement, but particularly for the ASYEs, multi-membership between university and placement/employer had been experienced, creating what Wenger et al (2002: 18) describe as a “double knit” which is perhaps reflected by the greater understanding of professional requirements demonstrated by Year 2/3 students and ASYEs. Indeed, Wenger et al (2002) argue that multi-membership enables practitioners to better address practice problems, which is reflected in the ASYE concerns to ensure students fully understood and were ready for the challenges of qualified practice and how this differs from being a student. There were also clear professional development benefits for ASYEs continuing mentoring which may be of interest to other ASYE programmes. The mentoring scheme provided evidence for CPD as the ASYEs were required to submit a portfolio and be formally assessed against the PCF and the KSS. The ASYEs benefitted in relation to their professional development, understanding professional identity and organisational context as well as meeting the PCF requirement of professional leadership which enabled them to evidence ongoing CPD. Moreover, mentoring was a potential springboard into other CPD activity such as Practice Education which sustains mentoring skills. For our programme, the newly qualified social workers ceased to mentor at the end of their ASYE but there appear to be ongoing CPD benefits for qualified social workers to be involved in mentoring across their careers. Indeed, the recent introduction of the Social Work Apprenticeship in England where apprentices undertake 80% of their social work qualification in the workplace during their social work degree is an ideal opportunity for employers to build in mentoring for social work within their careers and increase sustainability of mentoring in social work practice.

Limitations

Interpretation of the data is only tentatively offered as the sample size for all elements of data collection is small and the year 1 experiences represented a group of students who mainly had negative experiences of the buddying scheme (which skews data). Therefore, whilst we argue that there are many benefits provided by the buddying scheme, further research is advisable.

We accept that drawing on the literature from other vocational disciplines such as nursing is not without criticism because the professional requirements, expectations and values between these professional groups are not the same. However, we feel there is sufficient common ground for us to justifiably rely on this literature in the absence of empirical research about social work education and mentoring.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has outlined the findings from a small qualitative study of mentee and mentor experiences of an undergraduate social work scheme. The findings point towards some positive advantages gained from the scheme which traverses the academy and practice by the continuing involvement of mentors during their ASYE. There is evidence that the theoretical framework of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is pertinent. Cautiously, we suggest there is a developing community of practice through the buddying scheme but this has been negatively impact by “illegitimate non participation” which required further guidance on mentor expectations to be issued. Despite these optimistic indications, however, as indicated, the sample sizes were small and data for the year 1 mentee cohort may not be representative, so further research is advised.

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