Buddy system for nursing students: two practice focused approaches to peer support

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Background and rationale

The project aimed to develop, implement and evaluate two systems of peer support for Nursing Students.

The project objectives were to:

(i)   Develop two evidence based approaches to peer support through buddying.

(ii)   Implement two systems of peer support in two local NHS Trusts.

(iii)   Evaluate the value and impact of peer support for participants.

(iv)   Consider the impact of peer support on student progression and retention.

Retention in Higher Education (H.E.) is a major concern; however the issues regarding retention of nursing students are not new (White et al, 1999). It can be suggested that nursing students are disadvantaged in having to adapt to both Higher Education **and** to the realities of learning in the workplace. Wong & Lee (2000) found that a conducive workplace learning environment was a particularly important factor for developing nursing practice. Elements contributing to such an environment have been previously established as good interpersonal relationships and the presence of positive role models. Brown & Edelman (2000) support this and identify that social support in the workplace learning environment effectively reduces stress. Focus on how best to support students in the workplace learning environment, centres on the concept of mentorship (Cahill 1996). There does however seem to be a disparity of expectations regarding the mentor role, for example overlap with the role of assessor (Cahill 1996). Additionally, mentors may have limited knowledge of current HEI issues and the current shortage in qualified nurses and the demands of work, may have influenced the support available to students in practice areas (Elkan & Robinson 1995). There is, therefore, an identified need for other support systems in nurse education, which would address students' adaptation to both Higher Education and professional learning. The proposed project would also foster mentoring skills in those acting as buddies.

Finally, emerging findings from the School of Health's retention project suggested students valued peer support and would appreciate a more structured support mechanism in workplace settings.

The innovation

Two approaches to peer support through Buddying were used. Firstly, the **Trust Based Scheme**, where students commissioned to one Health Care Trust for an Adult Nursing Programme, commencing in October 2002, were buddied by Year 3 Students from the same Trust (n = 42). Secondly, the **Practice Placement Scheme** where, over a nine month period, all 1st year students undertaking practice placements in two ward areas within a Health Care Trust, were buddied whilst on this placement by a third year student (n = 10).

A. Trust Based Scheme

An initial meeting was set up on University premises. Rights and responsibilities of participants were discussed (Appendix 1) and academic support identified. Students were introduced to their Buddy and arrangements for future meetings (a minimum of 3 over a 9 month period) discussed. Students were invited to attend a series of Focus Group meetings with Academic Staff. A questionnaire was also sent to participants at the end of the 9 month period.

Results

The findings can be summarised as follows.

Junior Buddies	
Anticipated benefits	**Actual Benefits**
Informed support	Extra 'layer' of support. Good source of information
Realistic information	Information 'cascade' from Buddy to Buddy and then to colleagues. More realistic expectations
Easy access to support	Approachability
Alleviation of anxiety	Alleviation of anxiety, especially about placements.

Junior Buddies	
Anticipated limitations	**Actual Limitations**
Finding time to meet	Finding time to meet
Feeling a burden	Lack of interest of some seniors
Unsure of how much to burden mentor	Senior buddy discussing their own bad experiences

Generally the main weakness for the students was finding time to meet up:
"Third years were very busy".
"She was very busy and our time off did not correspond".

The strength for junior students was clearly in one to one support:

"Personally it was a lovely experience. I have benefited from her kind words of encouragement.......it has helped me to be more relaxed".

"I met a lovely student who supported me and helped me through my first year".

Senior students also identified clear benefits of participating as Buddies. These can be summarised as:

Senior Buddies	
Anticipated Benefits	**Actual Benefits**
Developing interpersonal skills, information giving skills, facilitating independent learning.	Developing skills necessary for mentorship.
Preparation for future role.	Preparation for future role Provide structure to relationship with first year students. Practice with more structured support e.g. teaching session.

Senior Buddies	
Anticipated limitations	**Actual limitations**
Unreasonable requests	
Uncertain of boundaries	Requests for help with work.
Overlap with other formal roles (e.g. Personal Tutor).	
Confidentiality	
Time	Arranging meeting Mentees not attending
	Lack of preparation for role

Some seniors felt that group meetings i.e. a Support Group of seniors and juniors would be a more effective approach.

The main topics where support or information was required by students were:

• Placements

• Assessment of work

• Study Skills

• Sources of information

Conclusions

This was a small pilot study, therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings. The feedback from students was largely positive and suggests that the introduction of a modified scheme to all students is worth considering. The resource complications of administering such a scheme would be considerable. However, the use of support networks (e.g. small 'groups' of seniors/juniors) would reduce the resource implications.

B. Practice Placement Scheme

Managing student allocations to ensure that an equal number of both junior and senior students were on placement at the same time and for the same duration, was the first identified limitation of this scheme. Due to the complexities of this process the initiation of the project was delayed for five months. This considerably reduced the numbers of students that could be sampled and in order to balance this a second medical placement area was recruited to this project The result of this process was a 50% reduction in student participants.

Strengths of the placement system

Overall students were positive about their experiences of peer support in the placement area. Junior students communicated that they recognised senior buddies as a valuable resource. They valued working the same duties as their buddy and clearly defined the buddy as an additional support mechanism. Some junior students utilised the support of other senior students who were not their named buddy and this was recognised as being equally as valuable. The junior students all communicated that they had had positive experiences during the placement from both learning and social integration perspectives. It was recognised that the greater the percentage of time that the junior and senior students worked together, the more successful the partnership.

The broader benefits of this system seem to have been experienced by the senior students. This group unanimously felt that the partnership had developed their skills in teaching and supervision. Several students concluded that the experience had also developed their own practice skills as they had revisited knowledge related to many aspects of care and therapy in order to teach and support the junior students. There had been an initial concern from some members of the senior group that their own learning time would be restricted due to the demands of the junior buddy however in reality this problem did not manifest and none of the participants felt their own learning had been compromised. The senior students also shared a feeling of growing confidence in their own knowledge and skills, confirmed by their ability to teach and support others. One student commented that she was, 'Automatically doing it, (supporting junior students), on my new ward'.

The relationships that developed between the buddy pairs varied depending upon the personalities involved. Some students commented that they had communicated with their buddy outside of the practice environment and one buddy pair was still communicating after the conclusion of the project. This suggests that the benefits of peer support were experienced within a social as well as a learning context.

Limitations of the placement system

Several students commented that the more time the buddy pairs worked together, the more successful and valuable the relationship was. Some placement areas had ensured that both the students worked similar duties. However, this was not standard in all areas and was cited as a barrier to success. Students also valued being given some protected time during the day with their buddy, as they felt this enabled the relationship to be more effective. Once again it was commented that in some areas this time was not secured.

The majority of the students recognised that although their own partnerships were positive and beneficial, had personalities within buddy pairs been different, this could have affected the outcome. The amount that the junior student utilised the support of the senior, varied from pair to pair. The influence of the confidence and maturity of the senior buddy, were cited as typical reasons for this. The variance in the intensity of support offered or experienced was clearly linked to the personalities and enthusiasm of the individual students.

"My buddy said it would be better if we did our own thing most of the time – she was very quiet and did not like teaching much, I used another senior student more, she would help – she was approachable" – Junior buddy.

"I did not feel that my buddy wanted lots of help so I offered it to others instead", – Senior buddy.

"My buddy was really enthusiastic I worked the same shift as her and we worked in the same bay – it was brilliant" – Junior student.

This would indicate that a system of self-selection for buddy pairs, may promote more effective support by minimising personality 'clashes' and/or reluctant partners.

Areas in which support was sought/given

The majority of support that was utilised within the placement system was in the area of clinical skills development. Junior students recognised the senior students as role models and utilised them as a first point of call for information and advice when providing care for patients. The senior students all communicated that they had undertaken teaching sessions both formally and informally with junior students.

No student communicated that they had been asked for inappropriate information or support and there was little evidence to suggest that students had utilised the relationship to directly inform academic work.

Concerns

The primary concern identified within this system of peer support was the intensity of support being offered by some senior students. One junior student commented that because she had worked regularly with her buddy, and her buddy was so approachable and enthusiastic, she had used her instead of/more than her practice assessor. The senior student had regularly supervised the junior undertaking clinical skills. Whilst the corresponding senior student conveyed that the relationship had been beneficial and had not been detrimental to her own learning, it must be recognised that there is potential for the buddy to be utilised inappropriately as a substitute for practice assessor.

Conclusions

It has been clearly demonstrated that student peer support is beneficial for both the junior and the senior student, however, three issues have been identified that will require resolution should the practice placement scheme be implemented.

- The allocation of equal numbers of junior and senior students in placement areas would need to be organised on an on-going basis.

- A system of self-selection for buddy pairs would have to be established to minimise the potential for ineffective relationships.

- The role of the senior buddy, and that of the practice assessor, would have to be clarified and regularly monitored to ensure that the supervision, safety, learning and assessment of both students were not compromised.

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APPENDIX 1

Rights & Responsibilities of Junior Buddy

You have the right/responsibility to:

- be treated with respect and equality
- set most of the agenda for each meeting
- confidentiality, except for revealing unsafe or illegal practice.
- end a buddying relationship.
- protected time to meet buddy.
- to attend Focus Group interviews as requested (max 4 occasions in 9 months).

Rights & Responsibilities of Senior Buddy

You have the right/responsibility to;

- be treated with respect and equality/confidentiality within agreed boundaries.
- challenge unacceptable behaviour.
- refuse inappropriate demands.
- end a buddying relationship
- protected time to meet buddy.
- encourage and support junior buddy to seek appropriate support.
- to attend Focus Group interviews as requested (max 4 occasions in 9 months).

Right & Responsibilities of Project Team

You have the right/responsibility to:

- protected time to attend Project Team meetings (75%attendance)
- protected time to undertake Focus Group interviews
- provide advice and support to students participating in Project Activities
- participate in dissemination activities
- confidentiality of data collected

Guidelines for Participants

The Project requires senior students to act as a buddy to junior students. This will assist the new students' integration into both the University and work place learning environments. The scheme also aims to foster mentor qualities in Senior Buddies e.g. effective communication skills, information giving, facilitating others to take responsibility for own learning.

Scope of Role

Face to face meeting should occur, as a minimum:

- on one occasion during each Semester, suggested duration 30 minutes on each occasion.

- Limitations for further contact should be agreed by Senior and Junior Buddy. N.B. Further contact could be via email, text, telephone.

- The role does not replace or reduce other support roles available e.g. Personal Teacher, Link Teacher, Practice Assessor, Group Teacher.

- Senior Buddies can decline inappropriate requests and advise Junior Buddies to seek appropriate support through the above mechanisms.

- Either buddy may decline to continue with the partnership at any time. However, a member of the project Team should be informed.