Training, implementation, and potential of a cybermentoring scheme in six EU countries

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Introduction

Peer support describes a range of activities by which the potential of people to be helpful to others, at a similar age or level, can be fostered through appropriate training. Peer support projects in the school context originated in Canada and USA during the 1970s and have since been adopted in a number of international contexts (Salmivalli, 2001; Childline, 2008; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Menesini, Nocentini, & Palladino, 2012). While some have academic objectives, many are focused on social relationships, including integrating lonely or rejected children, and coping with bullying. Main types of peer support include: befriending, mediation, mentoring and counselling-based or peer-listening approaches (Cowie & Smith, 2010). These schemes can offer a framework of support for vulnerable students in school, in addition to that provided by adult-based pastoral services. They are usually face-to-face and located within a particular school setting. More recently, online peer support projects have been developed. This article describes the organisation and training provided in a large scale online peer support project, BeatBullying Europe, involving 6 European countries, to provide guidance in the design and delivery of such programs in future. Although the project was not fully completed, we (1) report an evaluation of the training of the mentors and life mentors, via questionnaire survey, and (2) discuss findings about the implementation of the scheme and its potential at a cross-national level, via partner interviews during and at the end of the project.

Benefits of peer support schemes

Peer support schemes have particular potential as a means of reducing bullying. Victims of school bullying are often wary of telling adults, often fearing retribution; a particular advantage of peer support is that they may feel more able to approach a peer of similar or slightly older age. Thus, peer support schemes might help individual pupils who use the scheme to stop being victimised, reduce general rates of bullying throughout the school, and bring about a general improvement in the school climate. The evidence from a number of studies (Cowie & Smith, 2010; Coleman, Sykes & Groom, 2017) is that schools using well-managed peer support schemes are seen as being more caring and concerned about pupil well-being. In addition, peer supporters themselves generally benefit from the experience (Houlston & Smith, 2009). There is evidence from individual cases that some pupils, who use peer support schemes for reasons of being bullied, do report being helped; however, findings for significant changes in general levels of bullying behaviour as a result of implementing a peer support scheme, are more mixed.

Online peer support could have several particular advantages over face-to-face peer support (Palladino, Nocentini, & Menesini, 2012). Firstly, there is greater anonymity, reducing anxieties that a victim may have of being identified as such and facing possible scorn or retribution. Secondly, an online scheme can reach pupils in schools or elsewhere, where there is no face-to-face peer support scheme in place. Another consideration is that records of online mentoring can potentially be used in evaluating the operation and success of such schemes. on In a review of 6 online projects including UK pupils (one being an earlier evaluation of BeatBullying, Thompson, Robinson & Smith, 2013; see below), Coleman et al. (2017) found that two clearly demonstrated improved mental health outcomes, and four showed no change. In Italy, Menesini, Nocentini and Palladino (2012) and Palladino, Nocentini, Menesini (2016)

have reported beneficial outcomes in studies of Italian high schools, where peer educators were trained to answer questions and monitor a web forum and a Facebook page; compared to control schools, some reduction in bullying perpetration and being a victim were found.

As described, the success of peer support schemes, including online schemes, varies considerably. A number of issues have been suggested to explain this variation. One is the recruitment of peer supporters; they can be selected by the teacher, nominated by classmates, or be volunteers. There is limited evidence regarding this, but one study has found volunteers to be more effective than peer nominated pupils (Zambuto, 2018). Related to this is the issue of gender balance: there are often more girl than boy volunteers, particularly in the secondary sector (Cowie & Smith, 2010). However there are typically as many boy as girl victims, and pupils may feel more comfortable confiding in a same-sex peer supporter. Another issue is the quality of training of peer supporters, which needs to cover issues around confidentiality as well as when it is necessary to refer on to a teacher or other professional. There needs to be adequate and continuing supervision by an accessible member of staff. Finally, there needs to be effective promotion of the scheme, and sufficient take-up by those seeking support through the scheme so that peer supporters feel positive in their role (Cowie & Smith, 2010; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Coleman et al., 2017; Menesini, Zambuto & Palladino, 2017).

Although peer support schemes are now used in many countries, there has been little comparison of the implementation of peer support schemes cross-nationally. Cowie and James (2016) provided a narrative review of such schemes in England, Japan, and South Korea; they found that differences in peer support schemes in the latter two

countries may reflect the greater salience of peer rejection as a means of bullying. However quantitative studies to date have focussed on processes and outcomes of schemes in individual countries, rather than providing any comparative data.

BeatBullying cybermentors: how the scheme worked

BeatBullying cybermentors was an online peer support model providing a virtual form of peer mentoring. It was launched in 2009 in the United Kingdom (U.K.) using the BeatBullying website. BeatBullying had been founded in 1999 and registered as a U.K. charity in 2002 (Kaenel-Flatt & Douglas, 2012). In 2010, the Department for Children, Schools and Families included BeatBullying's cybermentors in their peer mentoring pilot, which funded training in the pilot schools. In 2012, BeatBullying received 1.3 million from the UK Government's Big Society funds and the BB Group was founded. The charity continued to roll out cybermentor training in UK schools until its liquidation in 2014.

The BeatBullying training program recruited cybermentors from secondary schools with young people aged 11 to 16 years, who volunteered or were nominated by a member of teaching staff. Cybermentors, like other peer supporters, were trained to deal with low-level bullying such as friendship fallouts and were instructed to refer more serious issues (self harm; sexual abuse; suicidal thoughts) to accredited counsellors. They received two day training workshops on listening empathically, giving appropriate advice, understanding privacy and safety issues, and knowing when to seek support from more experienced adults. A nominated member of staff supervised and supported the cybermentors in school, particularly if they were also delivering face-to-face mentoring. Some schools wanted their cybermentors to provide face-to-face mentoring for the other students in their school in addition to mentoring online, which was open to all young people. Older, more experienced

cybermentors (aged 16-25 years) graduated to become senior cybermentors or life mentors, supporting older mentees and dealing with more more complex issues such as depression.

Unlike traditional forms of peer support which operate in a school environment within school hours, cybermentoring provided online support through a social networking website both in and out of school hours. Cybermentors' identities were protected by using an anonymous, online persona called a widget. Mentoring sessions were monitored by adult moderators and a software programme, Netmod, which was designed to detect abusive or inappropriate language and enabled to block the mentoring session. Young people who needed support (mentees), whether for bullying or other issues such as sexuality; depression or anxiety, accessed the cybermentors by logging onto the BeatBullying website and posting a message (see Figure 1). Cybermentors logged into a chatroom for open sessions, advising on problems that were posted on the website from students from their own or other schools. Before a mentoring session, cybermentors and mentees had to click an agreement to participate and both parties had the option to terminate the session at any time. In the absence of their school supervisor, BeatBullying staff provided online support on demand through the website.

Figure 1 about here

Evaluations in the UK

The BeatBullying cybermentor scheme was first evaluated in the UK by Banerjee, Robinson and Smalley (2010) when the training and programme were quite new. They found that having BeatBullying mentors was associated with a reduction in pupils being persistently bullied, by about a quarter, in five intervention schools. BeatBullying's training was highly regarded and the cybermentors were found to raise awareness of bullying and

cyberbullying in schools and be particularly effective at transition from elementary to high school for younger students.

Also at this early stage in the programme, Thompson and Smith (2011) reported on the use of cybermentoring in six case study secondary schools in the UK. The feedback from teaching staff and students involved was generally positive. Most cybermentors and staff thought the training was good or very good, although staff from two schools found the scheme launch and student take-up slow.

During 2010-11 a further evaluation was carried out in the U.K. (Thompson et al., 2013). Here, cybermentors and cybermentees were invited to voluntarily fill in a short online questionnaire after each cybermentoring session. Feedback was analysed from 30 cybermentors and 30 cybermentees where cyberbullying was involved. Of the cybermentors, 93% found the website easy or very easy to use, 100% felt safe or very safe on the website, and 88% felt well or very well supported by BeatBullying (with 12% unsure). One cybermentor commented that "You feel that you can help people out and this will make a big difference to their lives, no matter how big or small their problem was". Of the cybermentees, 80% found the cybermentors' advice helpful or very helpful; 12% were unsure and 8% found it unhelpful; 86% said they would use the cybermentor scheme again; and 86% would recommend cybermentors to a friend. As one cybermentee commented, "The good part about the session was being to tell someone I don't know everything and just let it out without getting criticised". Generally, the cybermentor scheme was highly thought of by those using it. However, 86% of cybermentors and 90% of cybermentees were female. Thompson et al. (2013) concluded that there was clearly a need to engage more males in the process.

The BeatBullying Europe cybermentoring scheme was designed to build on these evaluations in the U.K., taking account of the recommendations made, and of other research findings (Menesini et al., 2012; Palladino et al., 2012; Coleman et al., 2017). Specifically, high quality training and supervision of peer mentors, the importance of a good gender balance, full engagement of schools, and effective promotion of the scheme.

BeatBullying Europe: A DAPHNE III project

In 2013, BeatBullying obtained funding from the DAPHNE III programme (http://tav-eu.org/daphne-iii-funding-programme/) to extend the cybermentoring scheme into 6 countries in the EU. The project was scheduled to continue to 2015. The BeatBullying Europe project was carried out by 7 partners. These were from the Czech Republic, Italy (2 teams), Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. An eighth partner from the UK was the independent evaluator.

The six main objectives of the BeatBullying Europe project were to: (1) Design and develop an online cybermentors portal based on BeatBullying's UK prototype, where young people across the EU could access support, information and advice from mentors and professionals in their own country and language; (2) Develop and deliver training to professionals in 6 EU countries, to equip them with skills to deliver cybermentors training in schools to young people; (3) Deliver the cybermentors programme within schools in 6 EU countries, training young people as peer mentors and to establish networks of peer support; (4) Deliver launch events in each country to raise the profile of the programme and initiate a communications campaign, directing young people in crisis to the new resource; (5) Evaluate the impact of the programme using a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques.; and (6) Reduce the impact and incidence of violence and bullying on vulnerable children and young people.

Project activities

From June 2013, BeatBullying developed a cybermentors EU portal based on the UK model, translated into six languages (Objective 1). Training was delivered on a cascade model. From September to December 2013, the BeatBullying trainers delivered training to all 7 partner's trainers and life mentors in 4-day workshops. These were train the trainer workshops (Objective 2). From October 2013, the partners recruited schools and delivered cybermentor training with a target of about 200 students each. (Objective 3). The project had national launches in 2014 in Italy (March 25 and May 19); Spain (April 1); Romania (April 25); Poland (April 25); Portugal (May 6); and Czech Republic (June 18). From March to October 2014, cybermentors from all 6 countries were going online using the websites (Objective 4).

The UK evaluation team developed online evaluation questionnaires and interviews, and monitored the project through ongoing contact with the seven other partners (Objective 5 was partly achieved).

However in October 2014, the BB Group, of which BeatBullying was a part, encountered significant financial problems and, due to the EU withholding any further funding, the website went down. In November 2014, the BB Group went into liquidation. The project could not be completed; however the first four objectives were mostly achieved, with some progress on the fifth. This article describes and evaluates the training of the mentors and life mentors, and discusses findings about the implementation of the scheme, some challenges it faced, and its potential at a cross-national level.

Methodology

Recruitment

Seven training partners volunteered for the project from six target EU countries. Of the seven, six were charities and the seventh a university department. The eighth evaluation partner, carrying out the evaluation, was from a university research unit. The seven training partners each provided two trainers (professionals from the organisation), and had to recruit 8 secondary schools (with a school coordinator - a teacher in the school assigned to the project). Some partners had ongoing involvement with schools, either as charities or for research purposes and were able to recruit schools and mentors from their existing contacts; others had to recruit schools through email. The target was to recruit and train 200 cybermentors (11-16 years-old) overall. Students either volunteered or were selected by the teacher designated to supervise the cybermentors. The partners also had to recruit 9 life mentors (16-25 years-old); 2 moderators (25 years plus) and 2 accredited counsellors for the website. Moderators were recruited from existing staff or volunteers and accredited counsellors were recruited through either their professional contacts or advertising.

Train the trainer workshops

BeatBullying staff ran a 4 day workshop in each country, for two trainers, the life mentors, and members of the training partner organisations. These train the trainer workshops included basic groundwork (definitions of bullying and cyber bullying; the consequences of bullying); an introduction to mentoring skills (boundaries; confidentiality; referral) and how to use the BeatBullying website, including the website rules. The training was interactive using games, videos and discussion. BeatBullying trainers graduated with a copy of the train the trainer handbook for future reference. Additional online training and resources were available to provide ongoing support to professionals.

Training mentor workshops

The two trainers with each partner then delivered substantially similar training to the mentors recruited in each country. The mentors were trained in shorter 2 day workshops using a similar format and content as train-the-trainer sessions; however, the language, videos and games were modified to be age-appropriate. Cybermentors received a graduation certificate; badge and a mentor handbook for reference. Ongoing support was available online through the website and face-to-face from school coordinators in the schools.

Websites and mentoring

Training partners designed their website, and once launched, mentors went online. The methods of mentoring and supervision were as in the UK operation, described earlier. The scheme was promoted within the selected schools, but was potentially open to anyone who visited the website.

Evaluation of the training

The evaluation partner devised a post-training questionnaire for life mentors to evaluate the train-the-trainer workshops, and for mentors to evaluate their training sessions. Mentors accessed the questionnaire online through the BeatBullying website. It was filled in confidentially, immediately after the completion of training. It had three sections.

Four items rated the quality, organisation, presentation, and preparation for mentoring of train-the-trainer sessions. All items were scored on a 5-point scale (1=very bad; 2=bad; 3=neither bad nor good; 4=good; 5=excellent). These items were found to correlate highly (α= .80).

Eight items measured the confidence levels on a range of skills developed in the workshop (see Results), based on a 5-point scale (1= very unconfident; 2=unconfident;

3=neither unconfident nor confident; 4=confident; 5=very confident). These items were found to correlate highly (α= .83).

Two items measured use of the website. One was on ease of use, with a 5-point scale (1= very difficult; 2=difficult; 3=neither difficult, nor easy; 4=easy; 5=very easy). The other was on how safe they felt on the website, with a 5-point scale (1= very unsafe; 2=unsafe; 3=neither unsafe, nor safe; 4=safe; 5=very safe).

Evaluation of the implementation of the scheme and its potential at a cross-national level

The evaluation partner carried out ongoing monitoring of the progress of the project by regular semi-structured interviews and e-questionnaires with the training partners. E-questionnaires were emailed directly to the coordinators from participating schools in November 2013 and May and September 2014. They focused on organisation of the mentor training sessions in schools; promotion and dissemination of the project; and cultural and procedural difficulties in implementation. Final comments were solicited in November 2014. This data was all qualitative.

Further questionnaires were designed to measure the overall impact of the project, including post-session questionnaires for mentors and mentees. While much of this was actually gathered, it has not been possible to retrieve this data, which was lost when the website was suddenly deactivated in October 2014.

Ethical issues

Key ethical issues were the protection of young people from harm, and treatment of confidential information. BeatBullying had developed both child protection protocols and a safeguarding policy and procedure. Parental consent had to be sought by the school before training commenced. Trainers, and any adult working on the Beat Bullying website, had to have passed a police check. Safeguarding the cybermentors was fundamental to the

BeatBullying training, particularly referral to a counsellor. Safeguarding on the website was provided by adult moderators and a specially developed software, Netmod. The cybermentors' anonymity was protected by an online identity. Continuity of support for the cybermentors in school was provided by training two members of staff using the train the trainer model, in each country. Should one member leave, the project could continue with the remaining member with online 'top-up' training sessions delivered to new staff through the BeatBullying website.

Once trained, the cybermentors were supported by a designated member of staff in their school, who in turn was supported by the BeatBullying partner in their country. Additional support was given through older life mentors and trained adults through the website. Some issues raised by partners were related to: obtaining police checks for people working in the project; authorising underage mentors (collecting written permission to participate in cybermentoring by schools, parents and the mentors themselves); and safeguarding (in particular referral when anyone online disclosed possibly dangerous situations).

Institutional ethics approval was obtained for all the evaluations carried out by the UK evaluation partner.

Results

General demographics

Table 1 shows the number of school coordinators, mentors, and life mentors from whom data were obtained in each country, and their gender. The target of training about 200 mentors in each country was broadly achieved. The numbers of mentors was lower for the Czech Republic and Spain; in fact these partners reported training 207 and 213 mentors

respectively, but many questionnaires submitted by Czech and Spanish mentors in the three weeks before the website crashed became irretrievable.

Of the 890 mentors, 702 completed online questionnaires with general demographics (the remainder completed paper questionnaires without this). Of these, 62% were female and 38% were male. Of the 69 life mentors, 61 provided demographic information. Of these, 66% were female and 34% were male (Table 1). While not reaching gender parity, this was a better gender balance than was found in the previous UK – based evaluation (Thompson et al., 2013).

Table 1 about here

From available data on this, 502 (58%) students volunteered to be a mentor and 360 (42%) students were asked to be a mentor. There was an association between country and type of recruitment, χ_2 (5, N=862) =144.22, p<.001) with the majority of Czech (80%); Spanish (68%) and Polish mentors being asked to be mentors and the majority of Italian (85%); Portuguese (61%) and Romanian (61%) mentors volunteering.

Evaluation of the training

Mean ratings given by the life mentors for the train-the-trainer sessions are shown in Table 2a. Ratings averaged between good and excellent. Ratings by the mentors for their training are shown in Table 2b; these are also high, generally slightly but not significantly less than for life mentors. By country, there were no significant differences in mean ratings by mentors on the first three items, with all ratings averaging between good and excellent. On the last item, training as preparation for role as a mentor, the Portuguese mentors gave significantly higher ratings than other partners, F(5,881) =12.63, p<.0001.

Table 2 about here

Mean ratings for confidence levels of life mentors after the train-the-trainer sessions, on a range of 8 skills, are shown in Table 3a. These are generally at the 'confident' level. Mean ratings for confidence levels of mentors, after their training, are shown in Table 3b. These are also mainly at the 'confident' level. There were no significant differences in the mean ratings from life mentors and mentors. Ratings were high for knowing what bullying and cyberbullying are, how to report bullying and when to refer to a counsellor. They were lowest for confidence in mentoring face-to-face; this was not a focus of the training but was an option for particular schools.

Comparing confidence levels of mentors by country, there were significant differences for two items. For Mentoring someone on the BeatBullying website, Czech and Polish mentors were less confident than the Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian mentors, $F(5,879) = 12.59$, $p < .0001$. There were delays in developing and completing the BeatBullying websites in all of the countries, so many of the training sessions took place without the national platform being fully functional. This could be the cause of lower confidence levels in the Czech and Polish mentors.

There was also a significant effect of country on mentoring someone face-to-face in school, where Italian, Czech and Polish mentors were less confident than the Romanian, Portuguese and Spanish mentors, $F(5,867) = 10.87$, $p < .0001$). As the online mentoring training sessions became delayed, some partners decided not to train for face-to-face mentoring. This could explain the lower confidence levels expressed by the mentors in the latter three countries.

Table 3 about here

Ratings by life mentors and mentors for how easy the BeatBullying website was to use are shown in Table 4(a,b). Most ratings averaged around the easy level. There was

a moderate effect of country for mentor ratings, F(5,866) =7.49, p<.001; the Portuguese,

Polish and Romanian mentors found the website easier to use than the Czech, Spanish

and Italian mentors. Ratings from life mentors and mentors for how safe they felt on the

BeatBullying website are also shown in Table 4(a,b). Most ratings averaged around the

safe level. There was a moderate effect of country, F(5,875) =7.17, p<.001, with the

Portuguese and Romanian mentors feeling safer than in the other four countries.

Table 3 about here

Evaluation of the implementation of the scheme and its potential at a cross-national level

Organisation of training sessions: Most mentor training sessions took place in schools.

However, there were issues with access to equipment and internet and timetabling. Some

partners had to deliver sessions out of school time and premises, which incurred additional

costs.

Promotion and dissemination of the project: BeatBullying launched the CyberMentors

Europe project on Safer Internet Day 2014 (http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/safer-internet-

day/2014/supporters). Information about the cybermentors project was disseminated by the

partners in a variety of ways, using flyers, posters, press releases, radio and TV interviews,

websites and social networking sites, magazines, workshops, youth conferences, and

Ministry contacts. Despite an official launch event in each country, the websites were

initially little used. This was not unexpected, as the cybermentors scheme had taken some

years to be widely recognized in the UK. The partners increased their efforts to promote the

scheme in the national and international press. As one partner commented: "The

BeatBullying mentoring scheme is not a well known project in Italy, so it's important to

provide a big event to raise awareness and interest/engage the students. The lack of

information in schools about the cybermentors model means it's not so easy for mentees to use the website; to be supported and have a counselling session" (Italian partner).

Cultural and procedural difficulties: Some cultural issues were encountered, notably issues around translating the term 'bullying' in questionnaires; this was especially a problem in Romania, where no word closely similar to bullying was identified. Some partners also mentioned resistance to a project seen as imported from the UK.

Procedural issues included delays with setting up the six national websites due to translation and technical issues. Some school coordinators and partners raised objections to including transgender as an option in the demographic section of questionnaires (so this was removed). Another issue was the age of mentors; some partners considered 11-14 year-olds were too immature for the role, so to progress the project, mentors were restricted to the 14-16 year age range. Even so, the counselling role of mentors created legal issues as parental consent was needed for minors less than 16 years.

Although face-to-face mentoring was considered as an option in addition to online mentoring, by some schools, generally the focus and priority was on developing the website and getting the online mentoring underway; very little face-to-face mentoring had been registered by the time the project suddenly ceased.

During 2014, considerable delays in funding from the BB group resulted in financial repercussions and added difficulties for all partners. Nevertheless the main objectives of setting up and delivering the project (Objectives 1 to 4 above) were largely achieved.

Final comments: At a last interview in November 2014, partners were asked for final comments on the project and its potential. Extracts from these are reproduced below.

Despite the collapse of the BeatBullying Europe project, most partners were positive about what had been achieved, and future potential:

"We expected that the mentoring scheme (would) continue but without the platform being operational it was not possible. All other expectations were met – the project was a great success and had great potential for sustainability" (Polish partner).

"As bullying has a big impact in the schools; the interest for the project outputs was really enormous. A training programme was provided, to teachers. We learnt that teachers need very concrete training and tips in order to proceed. As negative aspect, I should say that schools did not accept there is bullying in their schools, so it is more difficult to eradicate the situation. The involvement and continuity of the students also has been a difficulty to be solved. The theme of the project is really important." (Spanish partner).

"There were benefits to mentors and mentees but on a very small scale …This can be a very interesting and useful project, also susceptible of replication over the universe of Portuguese-speaking countries. However, there are a number of issues which need improvement, namely regarding good planning, feasible and efficient website platform and timely reimbursements in order to keep things moving smoothly. This is a fantastic project that should continue. The website in different languages is ready, there are professionals trained - trainers, counsellors, moderators - a great potential of expertise that can't be wasted" (Portuguese partner).

"The project idea is very good and could be really useful for the target. The training was appropriate but the management of the project, not really good." (Romanian partner).

"It is difficult to accept that everything was finished because of economic problems of our coordinator. We hope it will not be a waste of money, energy and investment" (Italian partner)

"We were successful in awareness rising. After some troubles at the beginning, the website was working finally, and children liked and used it. It was getting more and more popular. Children in the recruited schools know about the scheme, they know that bullying is unacceptable and that there is help available for them. Therefore I see the project as successful … After two years of hard work we succeeded to promote the website, there were more children on the website every day, the media were interested in the project and we received invitations to a few schools to talk to teachers and parents about bullying and to present the project. We feel there is a huge potential in the project." (Czech Republic partner).

Discussion

The BeatBullying training was highly interactive, intensive and practical. The evaluation of the training found that the train-the-trainer workshops, which equipped the partners and life mentors with the skills and experience to deliver cybermentor training into schools and youth settings, were rated between good and excellent. The training was described as innovative, flexible, exhaustive, interactive and dynamic.

The mentor training, designed to equip students with the necessary skills to mentor online and offline, was also rated highly, between good and excellent, by mentors. When asked to rate their confidence levels on a range of skills needed for mentoring, mentors rated knowing how to identify bullying and cyberbullying; referral to a counsellor; reporting bullying; helping someone who is bullied/cyberbullied and mentoring on the BB website between confident and very confident.

Despite some delays in the delivery of the six national cybermentors portals, all were designed, translated and functioning up to October 2014. The life mentors and mentors rated the BeatBullying websites as easy to use, and that they felt safe on the website. As only a minority of school coordinators reported having had a peer support scheme previously, delivering a platform for this new form of peer support in 6 EU countries was a highly innovative result.

Another positive result was in recruitment and volunteering. The previous UK cybermentors evaluation identified a very large gender imbalance, with mentors being predominately female. Results from the European project, while not achieving gender parity, found a positive change in the gender balance, with partners recruitingd 38% male mentors and 34% male life mentors.

Country differences

We were able compare the six countries for the mentor's ratings of BeatBullying training (Table 2) and confidence levels and feelings about the BeatBullying website after training (Tables 3, 4). Overall, the ratings were high across all 6 countries. In each country, mentors rated the training as good to excellent, and felt reasonably confident regarding the eight mentoring skills assessed. They also felt they could use the website and felt reasonably safe on it.

There were some moderate country differences regarding the training (Tables 2, 3, 4). Generally, it was rated most highly in Portugal, followed by Romania, and least highly in the Czech Republic and in Italy. In Portugal and Romania the mentors had volunteered, rather than being selected by the teacher as in Czech Republic, and volunteer mentors might be more favourably inclined to the training. However this explanation is contradicted by Italy having the highest proportion of volunteers. Even if volunteers were

inclined to favour the training, research in Italy suggests that volunteer mentors might not be most effective in face-to-face mentoring (Zambuto, Palladino, Nocentini & Menesini, 2018), although this might be less so for online mentoring.

The overall picture is that country differences were relatively small, and there is no reason to doubt the potential of the cybermentoring scheme in each of the six countries.

The future of cybermentors and recommendations

The BeatBullying Group can no longer promote continued use of the cybermentors scheme as was planned, and copyright issues for the cybermentors method are unclear at present. Sustainability in this situation is linked to the fact that some schools have introduced knowledge and activities in their practice, and a number of professionals and young people have developed skills in networking and promoting anti-bullying and anti-violence messages. Some partners decided to insert this model and methods in their anti-bullying programs. For example, the Portugal partner reported that a mission to the Azores to promote the project in the Secondary School of Praia da Vitória was funded by the Government of Azores, and a partnership was established with the City Council of Amadora (Lisbon metropolitan area) to extend the project in the municipality.

We would suggest that cybermentors could be included as a potentially useful model for reducing bullying. Some other online mentoring projects have produced positive findings (Menesini et al., 2012; Coleman et al., 2017). This approach has the advantage of involving young people themselves, with undoubted benefits for those receiving the training. Mentees can receive help anonymously. The benefits for mentees, and the impact on bullying rates, remains to be more fully evaluated. Further research in this area should be supported.

Another recommendation is that it is important to fully engage with schools so that

they do not feel marginalised in the training and implementation process. This was shown

to be a risk in the earlier UK evaluation (Thompson & Smith, 2011). In this project, the

issue was particularly highlighted by the Italian partner:

"The first lesson is related to the importance of being committed with the schools.

We had the feeling that the model implemented is viewed by them too much top-down.

Mainly the activities are not really embedded in an ongoing process that involved the

whole school. We started the collaboration with the schools participating in the mentors'

trainings years ago, and we think that the success of the implementation is mainly due by

the strong existing partnership with them" (Italian partner).

Summary

The cybermentors project developed by BeatBullying was an innovative approach which

was evaluated positively in the UK. The BeatBullying Europe project was unfinished, due

to the decommissioning of the BB website and server in October 2014 and the BB Group's

subsequent liquidation in November 2014. Much important evaluation data was lost.

Nevertheless evaluation has been possible of the impact of the training, and of the

feasibility of implementation.

After the initial success in the UK, the online peer mentors scheme was carried out

with some success in the six other European countries: Czech Republic, Italy, Poland,

Portugal, Romania, and Spain. The cascade training model was effective, judging by

ratings of all those involved. The project was implemented in a generally successful way in

all six countries; there were difficulties and challenges, but in many respects these were

overcome in the course of the project. Partners generally saw potential in the scheme, and

were very disappointed by the sudden end to the project support.

There is thus good reason to believe that the scheme could be used in other countries. The main requirements are the training of trainers (and then peer mentors) and a suitably run website.

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