

**Research submitted by David King following receipt of a research bursary from the Teaching Council as part of the 2010 Kieran O’Driscoll Research Bursaries Scheme**

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## **Title**

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

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Date: February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011

## **Timeframe**

This research was conducted between the period of January to April 2010. Final write-up and submission of the minor dissertation to W.I.T. was completed on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2010.

## **Brief outline of research idea**

Formal mentoring schemes have existed in the worlds of business, medicine and third level education for many years, yet little research has been conducted into this area at second level. This study aimed to analyse the 2009/10 formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme at Blackwater Community School (BCS), Lismore, Co. Waterford. Twenty three teachers voluntarily mentored 220 pupils sitting state examinations as part of the scheme, which was monitored by two mentoring coordinators. Each mentor voluntarily selected ten to fourteen pupils of their choosing to mentor for the academic year. Compulsory one-to-one meetings were scheduled four times during the year over two week ‘mentoring rounds’ (September, October, January, April) and monitored by the junior/senior mentoring co-ordinators. Progress from the meetings was documented on the pupils’ ‘mentoring sheets’, which are part of their pupil journals. After each two week period, the junior and senior mentors had a scheduled meeting with their respective co-ordinators to discuss issues arising and to plan for the next round of mentoring. This scheme was developed in response to feedback from the staff of the school, via a 2006 development survey, for the need to enhance academic attainment as one of a number of priority areas for the school over the next five years. This scheme has seen changes in the last three years, but there has been no documented assessment of its outcomes by management or the mentoring coordinator.

## **Summary of research aims**

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

### **Research questions**

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

### **Objectives**

To obtain the answers to these questions and to achieve the overall aim of the study, the researcher endeavoured to fulfil the following objectives:

#### **Objective 1**

To examine the attitudes and opinions of the stakeholders to the organisation of the BCS mentoring scheme.

#### **Objective 2**

To explore the attitudes and opinions of stakeholders towards the formal mentoring relationships in which they were engaged as part of the scheme.

#### **Objective 3**

To investigate whether or not junior and senior pupils have different attitudes and opinions concerning (i) the organisation of the BCS mentoring scheme and (ii) their mentoring relationships.

#### **Objective 4**

To evaluate any changes that the stakeholders feel should (or should not) be made to the BCS mentoring scheme, and the reasons for these changes.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, I am defining the stakeholders in the BCS mentoring scheme as voluntary mentors, mentored pupils, the mentoring coordinator and school management. However, I am aware that there are potentially other stakeholders that should be considered (e.g. parents, community members, and the rest of the teaching staff).

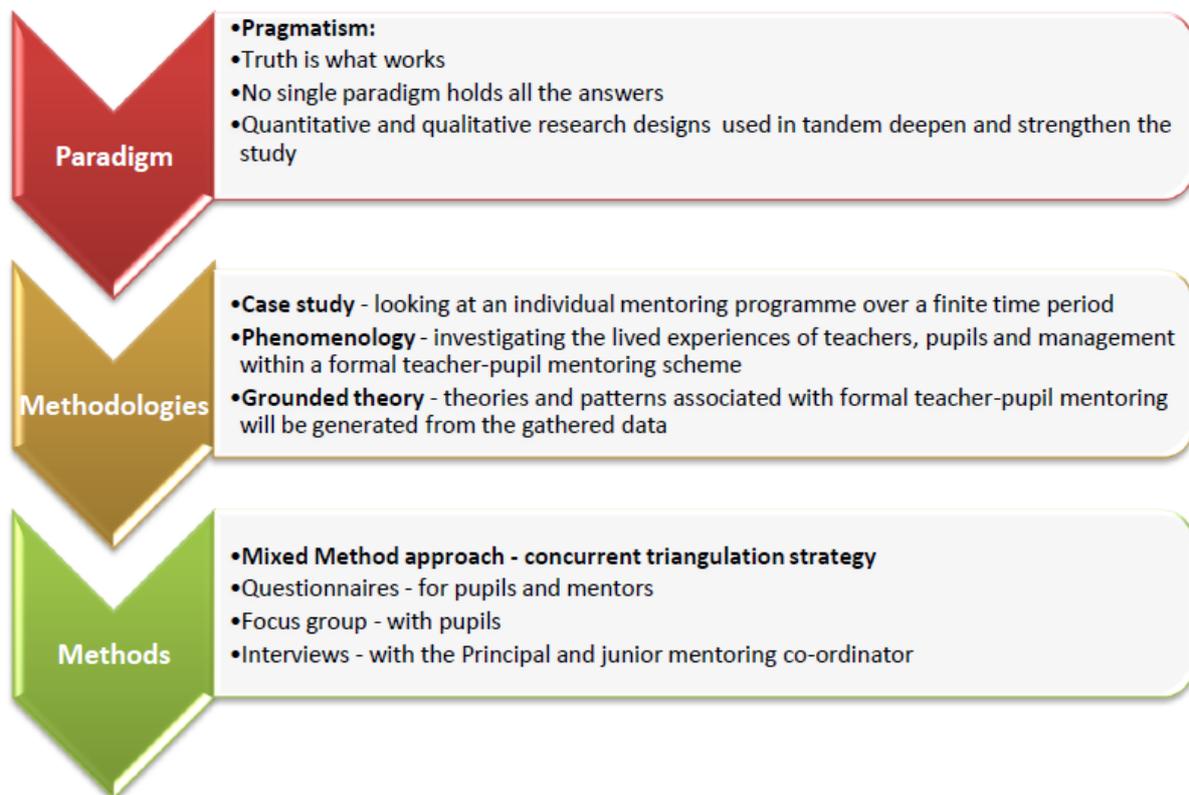
## Objective 5

To examine the perceived impact of the BCS formal mentoring scheme on the stakeholders and school.

## Outline of methodology used

### Research methodology adopted

I adopted a mixed methods approach to this study born out of a pragmatic worldview. Elements of case study, phenomenology and grounded theory are evident in the strategies of inquiry [methodologies]. The mixed method design adopted is a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell, 2009, p.213), whereby ‘the researcher collects both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and then compares the two databases to determine if there is convergence, differences or some combination’. This design is used in the context of this study to complement, expand and triangulate the research. Following from this, the research instruments for the study – questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, are identified. The link between the research paradigm, methodologies and methods is outlined below:



## **Ethical Considerations**

The Irish Teaching Council (ITC) offers guidelines for conducting ethically sound research as part of its research policy (ITC, 2001). Due to the fact that this study was partly funded by the Council, these ethical standards had to be maintained. Part of these guidelines include declaring any potential or actual conflict of interest (*ibid*, p.4). As such, I declare a potential conflict of interest in this research insofar as I am paid to fulfil the role of senior mentoring coordinator at BCS in the form of a special duties post allowance.

From the time of submission of the research proposal, I have taken a strong ethical stance in relation to this study. Ethical issues were addressed by seeking approval from the Waterford Institute of Technology Ethics Committee. Written consent was sought from the BCS Board of Management prior to the gathering of data. An ethics statement was provided to the Board, in which the researcher identified the proposed participants and methods of data collection. A number of research protocols were also outlined.

The British Educational Research Association (2004, p.6) advises that ‘the securing of participants’ voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research’. As such, all mentors involved in this study were asked for their written consent to participate. In the case of pupils, their parents were asked to provide written consent. However, I also enabled the pupils to give consent by informally requesting their cooperation when the parental consent letters were being distributed. This is in compliance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990), which requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express these views.

In looking for voluntary informed consent, I complied with good ethical practices and offered the participants:

- A brief synopsis of the purpose of the research and why their participation was required
- How their participation will be used and to whom it will be reported
- A guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality
- The opportunity to withdraw at any time and for any reason
- The opportunity for a debriefing following completion of the research

In relation to data gathered, the Irish Teaching Council advise that ‘researchers must keep clear and accurate records of the research procedures followed and hold securely any data

generated in the course of research' (ITC, 2001, p.4). Thus, all hard copies of original questionnaires, audio recordings of focus groups/interviews and data recorded in electronic format were retained. Respondents were informed at all stages of data gathering that some anonymous excerpts may be published in the findings of this dissertation.

### **Sample size and selection**

For this study, all pupils mentored under the 2009/10 BCS formal mentoring scheme have been sampled, giving a sample size of 220. Voluntary mentors have also been included, giving a mentor sample size of 23. Because they also served as mentors, the Principal (senior mentor) and junior mentoring coordinator (junior mentor) are included in this sample. Sampling in this study was purposively based on the criterion that participants had experienced formal teacher-pupil mentoring at BCS and were able to articulate their experiences.

### **Research Instruments**

Questionnaires: The questionnaires for pupils and mentors took a semi-structured format; the overall questions consisted of:

- A matrix-style list of comments to which participants had to respond on a five-point Likert scale.
- Open-ended questions to which participants were asked to give a qualitative response.
- Individual statements to which participants were asked to give a response on a five-point Likert scale, as well as space for an open-ended response. This allowed comparisons to be made between respondents but also enabled collection of rich qualitative data from participants on the statements.

The mentor and pupil questionnaires contained a number of similar questions, comments and statements. These were included to allow for comparative analysis between the attitudes and opinions of mentors and their protégés on various issues related to the research questions. Questionnaires were piloted with a small sample representative of the two groups; three junior and three senior pupils along with three senior mentors were used for the piloting process. For reasons of validity and reliability these participants were eliminated from the final sample group in this study. Response rates for the questionnaires were as follows:

Mentors – 19/19 – 100%

3<sup>rd</sup> year pupils – 92/108 – 85%

6<sup>th</sup> year pupils – 78/106 – 74%

### **Focus group**

Having collated and analysed the questionnaire data, a focus group was conducted with 6 mentees (3 junior, 3 senior). Following discussion with a critical friend, it was decided to purposively select focus group participants based on the depth of their questionnaire responses, both positive and negative. Preference was given to those respondents who contributed more in the open-ended questions. Based on this criterion, the critical friend then picked the focus group participants without my assistance to prevent researcher bias in selecting the sample.

### **Interviews**

To complete the data gathering process and for completeness, the junior mentoring coordinator and Principal were met for one-to-one interviews. The focused interview method was deemed the most suitable (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, pp.378-379). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with clarification sought from participants on the final transcript. A hierarchical focusing approach was used when asking questions – initial prompt questions allowed for open-ended responses by the interviewee (e.g.- are there any aspects of the mentoring scheme that you would like to comment on?) and were followed by prompt questions if further detail on certain issues were desired (e.g. – ‘what was your opinion of the organisation of the mentoring scheme?’)

### **Validity and reliability**

My position as the senior mentoring coordinator suggests that I would have a vested interest in identifying positive outcomes to improve the scheme. Likewise, this dissertation has been part funded by the Irish Teaching Council and as such it may be desirable to identify outcomes that would positively reflect on this Council. Both of these influential factors could lead to clouding of judgment on my behalf. I have adopted a number of strategies to ensure that these threats are minimised in the pursuit of high degrees of validity:

<b>Strategies adopted to obtain high degrees of validity</b>
Triangulation
Member checking
Clear exposition of methods of data collection and analysis
Reflexivity
Sensitivity to negative cases
Audit trail
Use of a reflective journal
Peer debriefing
Peer support in the form of a critical friend

I now wish to provide a clear exposition of my methods of striving for validity in data analysis. Because I am an advocate of the mentoring scheme, I adopted a statistical approach biased against my conjecture in the analysis of quantitative data from pupil and mentor questionnaires. In the calculation of averages to Likert-scale responses, any average below 3.0 was taken as a negative response. Standard deviations, which may have suggested a positive outcome for below 3.0, were ignored. Also, any significant figures after the decimal place were rounded down.

Due to its significance in the study, I also wish to elaborate on how triangulation was deployed. Data, theory and methodological triangulation were used in this study. Data was sourced from voluntary mentors, pupils, the junior mentoring coordinator and the Principal. Various theories on the mentoring phenomenon and formal mentoring were reviewed from educational research and other disciplines such as business, nursing and medicine.

Methodological triangulation was achieved through the mixed methods approach of using questionnaires, interviews and a focus group. The disadvantage of using these methods include the time taken, the difficulty in dealing with vast amounts of data and potential disharmony based on researcher bias (Thurmond, 2001). Aware of these weaknesses, I adopted the concurrent triangulation approach outlined above to enhance the completeness and confirmation of data in the findings of this study.

## **Summary of background reading**

### **Formal mentoring – global phenomenon, common template**

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

- Matching
- Training
- Monitoring
- Evaluating
- Feedback

These are implemented having defined the purpose and goals of the scheme. Arguably, the scheme must also fit in with the organisation's purpose and as such must contribute to organisational development and be part of career planning for the mentors and protégés.

### **Matching mentors with protégés**

In formal mentoring systems, there is traditionally some method of pairing mentors and protégés. This pairing is thought to impact substantially on the success of the relationship (Hale, 2000, in Cox, 2005). The similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971, in Parise & Forret, 2008) describes how individuals are attracted to those they perceive to be similar to themselves. It is suggested that being able to choose a protégé who is similar to oneself should make communication easier and the relationship more enjoyable for mentors (Lee *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, mentor input into the matching process has been related to increased commitment by the mentor and a greater understanding of the mentoring programme (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). The converse is also true; mentors without input into the matching process may perceive incompatibility with the protégé, lessening the probability that the relationship will endure and resulting in resentment from the mentor. Indeed, Armstrong *et al.* (2002, p.1112) argue that 'forced pairing violates the true spirit of mentoring'.

There is alternative evidence (Clutterbuck, 1998) to refute the importance of picking similar protégés. The similarity/difference model suggests that the best mentor-protégé pairing is that which is most different in terms of personality and experience and that matching mentors with similar protégés could actually be detrimental to the development of the mentor.

#### Organisational support in formal mentoring

Organisations are advised to show constant, visible and significant support for the mentors and protégés contributing to the mentoring process. Situations where perceived organisational support for mentoring has been low have been linked to negative attitudes towards the organisation (Billett, 2003; Nettleton & Bray, 2008), lack of generativity and a bad reflection of the mentoring scheme (Parise & Forret, 2008). Support from the organisation can be displayed in terms of reward and recognition for contributions made by mentors and protégés to mentoring. Likewise, support can be reflected in the time allocated by management and facilitators to the mentoring scheme.

#### **Monitoring and evaluation**

Studies show (Egan & Song, 2008, p.359) that formal mentoring relationships require organisations to provide not only systems of monitoring the success/failure of the scheme, but also facilitative measures ‘to keep the motivation of participation high and nurture a productive mentor – protégé relationship’. Normally, facilitators monitor and evaluate the scheme as an instrument of organisational development using various performance indicators relative to the type of mentoring scheme (e.g. profit turnover, exam performance, etc). They also monitor and evaluate the needs and motivations of mentors and protégés. It is important that the facilitator ‘becomes a supportive ally for the mentor-protégé pairs’ (*ibid*, p.359).

#### **Communication and feedback**

Empirical data suggest that mentoring programmes can have a positive effect on communications within an organisation (Conway, 1995; Wilson & Elman, 1990). Likewise, protégés and mentors dissatisfied with their formal mentoring schemes have cited poor communications as a major problem (Nettleton & Bray, 2008). Through sufficient communication and feedback loops, the new knowledge created from formal mentoring could become a tool for continuity and change within the organisation (Singh *et al.*, 2002). Formal mentoring is important because of its contribution to the organisation as a social system. Singh *et al.* (*ibid*) describe how formal mentoring, conducted properly, could be used as a

tool for the transmission of knowledge through the cultural network and hence develop cultural capital.

### **Formal mentoring – youth and education**

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

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

## Overview of research findings and recommendations

The research findings are displayed below, alongside the corresponding objectives of the research. A brief synopsis of how each research objective was satisfied is also included.

<b>Research objective</b>	<b>How the objective was satisfied and what was found</b>
<p>1. To examine the attitudes and opinions of the stakeholders to the organisation of the BCS mentoring scheme.</p>	<p>Factors related to the organisation of formal mentoring were researched in a comprehensive review of the literature. These factors were identified in a conceptual framework (selection criteria, training, support, communication, monitoring/evaluation) and framed in questions within the research instruments. The biggest issues from this study in terms of organisation seemed to be the need for ownership of the scheme, support for all parties and more effective communication amongst mentoring coordinators, management and parents.</p>
<p>2. To explore the attitudes and opinions of stakeholders towards the formal mentoring relationships in which they were engaged as part of the scheme.</p>	<p>Factors related to quality in the mentoring relationship (trust, time, challenge/support, effectiveness in meetings, commitment) were also researched through the literature and framed in questions throughout the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. In this study, the development of trust and a moral contract were arguably considered of most importance in the mentoring relationship, whilst lack of time was the most negative outcome of the research. A number of factors for effective formal mentoring meetings (goal setting, time management, planning) along with important characteristics of the mentor (empathy, friendship, listening, encouragement, familiarity) were also identified.</p>
<p>3. To investigate whether or not junior and senior pupils have different attitudes and opinions concerning (i) the organisation of the BCS</p>	<p>Quantitative and qualitative questionnaire responses were analysed and significant differences looked for between junior and senior pupil responses. Junior pupils seemed less satisfied at the level of mentor empathy shown in the relationship and with their ability to help with future choices. Senior pupils</p>

mentoring scheme and (ii) their mentoring relationships.	seemed dissatisfied with the teaching of study skills during mentoring
4. To evaluate any changes that the stakeholders feel should (or should not) be made to the BCS mentoring scheme, and the reasons for these changes.	Through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups it was found that pupils desire longer meetings at more significant times of year, more information and choice. Mentors also expressed the need for greater support from parents and practical training. Pupils would like to be mentored for both 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> year but mentors feel it would lose its impact if this was implemented.
5. To examine the perceived impact of the BCS formal mentoring scheme on the stakeholders and school.	Through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups it is suggested that development of relationships and rapport between teachers and pupils was the most positive outcome of the scheme. A number of positive outcomes were also identified for pupils (increased motivation, encouragement and confidence towards exams and enhanced attitude towards the school) and the scheme has arguably served as a knowledge-producing tool for the school on a pastoral and academic level.

Finally, I wish to offer an argument for the scheme as a good in itself, as opposed to using measured parameters to define its effectiveness. Communication links, scheduled meeting times, monitoring and evaluation are aspects of formal mentoring which seem to be valued by mentors, coordinators and management. However, the findings from this study suggest that all parties involved put a greater value on the aspects of the scheme that could be described as informal, i.e. the establishment of relationships and rapport with each other, enhanced attitudes and feeling supported. Whilst the formal structures seem important to the scheme, it would be beneficial to those involved to encourage the growth and enrichment of these informal elements of BCS mentoring. One could argue that without formal structures, the informal outcomes of mentoring which seem to be highly valued, would not be realised to the same extent. For example, if mentors and protégés were not scheduled into four mentoring rounds and expected to meet each other four times during the year, they might not have

invested as much time in their relationships. This could lead to less commitment to the scheme and to each other. The mentoring scheme, in its high degree of formality, is a testament to the Aristotelian virtue of *poiesis*. Through the relationships built within this facilitated scheme volunteers, in their dual roles as educators and mentors, can strive for *praxis*. Thus, the formal scheme seems, by proxy, to be a potential moral good in itself. I believe the following pupil quote epitomises the ‘goodness’ that can be born out of a formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme:

*‘Everyone needs a mentor. Just having someone to talk to and get on with is the most important thing’*

### **How the research has contributed to my professional development**

The knowledge gained in this research has helped on both a personal and school-wide level. Firstly, the findings have helped me to make positive changes to the 2010/11 mentoring scheme, the most notable of which were:

- The introduction of a mentoring handbook for mentors
- Longer one-to-one meeting times between mentors and protégés throughout the year, combined with the extension of the mentoring rounds from two to three weeks.
- The introduction of group mentoring sessions to reinforce the one-to-one meetings, which was been very positively received by both mentors and protégés.
- Improved communications between mentoring coordinators and management.

These changes have aided both me and the junior mentor in fulfilling our roles, which ultimately helps to improve the scheme for the good of the mentors, pupils and entire school. Finally, the research experience I have gained in conducting this study, along with the receipt of a bursary, would highly encourage me to pursue this, or other topics, on to PhD level.

## **How this research will benefit the teaching profession and the wider education community**

A key part of this study was to find out what works in a formal teacher-pupil mentoring scheme. From this research, the following guidelines would be of use to any manager of an Irish second level institution interested in initiating a formal mentoring scheme for their pupils:

1. The BCS mentoring scheme was specifically born out of a need to enhance academic attainment. In pioneering an initiative such as this, it is recommended that managers provide a reason for the initiative and communicate this to all interested stakeholders in a meaningful way ('sell it, don't tell it'). This study suggests that the need for the scheme should be primarily realised amongst the teaching staff, followed by pupils and parents. Without committed teachers on board, formal teacher-pupil mentoring may not be viable. The BCS scheme serves as an example of successful staff promotion of the initiative, resulting in committed mentors. One recommendation of increasing stakeholder 'buy-in' is to offer a choice; having a choice may contribute to increased ownership of the change, increased ownership may lead to increased commitment.
2. This study makes a case for the importance of strong leadership in the establishment of formal mentoring. It is recommended that the scheme be driven by facilitators, ideally outside of management. The BCS Board of Management has dedicated two special duties posts to this task. Constant, visible support and recognition of the voluntary work of mentors is recommended.
3. At BCS, the mentoring sheets and mentors meetings are recognised tools for feedback between pupils, mentors and coordinators. If a manager of any second level institution was to initiate such a scheme, they should consider how they are going to facilitate communication between these parties, as well as parents and the rest of the teaching staff.
4. Finally, managers are advised to remember what pupils valued highly in this study—guidance and support from an encouraging, empathic, friendly and enthusiastic mentor.

To conclude, this research highlights the fact that formal teacher-pupil mentoring, when conducted properly, is important and potentially improves the educational experience for pupils on a social, motivational, pastoral and academic level.