

“A BUDDY DOESN’T LET KIDS GET HURT IN THE PLAYGROUND”: STARTING SCHOOL WITH BUDDIES

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Abstract

Starting school can be a daunting experience for young children. Recognising the importance of peers and peer support during the start to school, many schools implement ‘buddy programs’ where older, more experienced students are paired with new school starters as a means of helping new children become familiar with school, and as a way of helping older students demonstrate responsibility for others in their school community. During 2004, a buddy training project operated in two suburban schools in Sydney, Australia where 25 teacher education students and 130 Year 5 school students participated in training days aimed to facilitate the development of communication, reflection and community building skills. Using conversational interviews, researchers identified areas of interest and concern as children entered these schools, as well as potential avenues for support. These provided the basis for the development of ‘training’ experiences by the teacher education students. This paper describes the buddy training program implemented in the two schools and uses the perspectives of children, university student teachers and school staff to evaluate the program.

Introduction

The importance of children’s relationships as they start school has been highlighted in recent research. Hamre and Pianta (2001, p. 625) note that “those children who are able to successfully navigate early social environments in school get off to a better start and continue to profit from their social knowledge and experience as they progress through elementary and middle school.” Indeed, children’s social adjustment to school is a marker of future school success (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, 1990; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996).

In addition to developing positive relationships with adults in the school environment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), relationships with peers have been identified as important elements of school adjustment (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996; Ladd & Price, 1987), particularly as they impact on children’s feelings about school (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). Children who start school with a friend, or who develop a close friendship during their first year of school are reported to have positive attitudes towards school and to adjust to the environment of school more readily than children without such strong friendships (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996).

In some investigations of friendships among children starting school, there is a focus on the continuation of friendships from the prior-to-school period through to the first year of school, or on the development of friendships within the first year at school (for example, Dunn, Cutting, & Fisher, 2002). There have been fewer investigations of the relationships developed between children of different ages, such as the relationships promoted by buddy programs. While these relationships may not necessarily constitute friendships, there are suggestions that “buddy pairs appear to relate to each other as friends would” (Hektner, August, & Realmuto, 2003, p. 409). Positive relationships among experienced school students and those new to the school environment have the potential to promote children’s positive adjustment to, and engagement in, school (Dennison, 2000).

Buddy programs

Buddy programs could easily be called peer mentoring programs or peer support programs. They are programs about engaging older, more experienced school students (in this paper, called ‘big buddies’) with younger, less experienced children (in this paper, called ‘little buddies’). They have the two-fold aim of supporting younger children as they establish familiarity with the new school environment, and promoting leadership and mentorship skills among the more experienced students (for examples, see Bush, 2003). Buddy programs usually occur within school contexts that aim to build responsive, collaborative and caring school communities, fostering social and emotional safety as an essential base for academic engagement and success. The perspective that school – and classroom – communities that promote a sense of belongingness also facilitate positive social interactions is a feature of many peer mentoring and support programs (Wentzel, 2003).

Mentoring programs, such as buddy programs, have been related to major improvements in children’s self-esteem, and positive connections to school, peers and family (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClennan, 2002). In addition to academic benefits, Stewart (2004) reports benefits for general health and wellbeing from programs of peer and adult support:

Students who perceived parents, teachers, and peers as supportive were more likely to have higher resiliency behaviour in communication and cooperation, self-esteem, empathy, help-seeking, goals and aspirations ... [they] were more likely to feel healthy ... providing adult and peer support to students at primary school age is a vital strategy in promoting student resiliency and general health... (p. S37).

The importance of buddy programs is seen in the benefits for each group involved. Dennison (2000) reports positive outcomes for all of those involved as buddies—in her study these were primary students and their high school buddies—as well as a group of university social work students who were also involved in the program. The children new to the environment benefited from consistent support, and the older buddies gained in confidence and competence. Noddings (1992) promotes the idea that children can be encouraged to contribute to a caring school environment as they move beyond a focus on themselves and their own needs and wants, and demonstrate concern for other, sometimes unknown children, such as those starting school.

Involving university students is seen as contributing to a current focus on service learning that involves community collaboration. Freeman and King (2001) describe service learning as a “pedagogy which explicitly connects community service with appropriate learning objectives” (p. 211) and contributes to “students’ mastery of academic objectives, fulfil[ment] of unmet community needs and support[s] learners’ social development, sense of self-worth, and competence” (p. 211). Within educational contexts, there is increasing expectation that teachers will be competent in working collaboratively, not only with school students, but also with other professionals, families and communities. Participation in a buddy program provides opportunities for university students to engage in such collaborative interactions and to develop their skills and understandings in this area.

Purposes of this paper

This paper has as its major purposes to:

- a) describe the planning and implementation of a buddy training program for Year 5 students in two Sydney primary schools; and

- b) use data from these Year 5 students, Kindergarten children, university student teachers and staff of the two schools to evaluate the success of the buddy training program against its stated aims.

Description of the program

In New South Wales, Australia, children can start school from the age of four-and-a-half years, provided they turn five by the end of July in their enrolment year. The compulsory school starting age is six years. There is only one intake into the school year, and this occurs at the beginning of the year, in late January. It is possible that any commencing group will include children aged from four-and-a-half years to six years. The first year of compulsory schooling is called Kindergarten, and is a full-day program.

Planning and implementing a buddy program

Drawing on a program operating in Stirling, Scotland (Conn, 2001), 130 Year 5 students (aged 10-11 years and in the penultimate year of primary school) participated in a program to develop their skills in communication, reflection, leadership and community building. These students worked with 25 early childhood and primary teacher education students from the University of Western Sydney who were completing an elective component of their programs under the guidance of the authors of this paper.

The school students were drawn from two schools in inner urban Sydney. Both schools had a diverse student population, with an average of 95% of students having a language background other than English. Each school had substantial populations of children from Arabic, Pacific Islander and Asian backgrounds, as well as smaller populations of children with African or European backgrounds. Both schools were located in a low socio-economic area of Sydney, with high levels of unemployment. The general geographical area surrounding the schools had been the focus of recent news stories about cultural tension.

The aims of the buddy program were to:

1. promote a positive start to school for new Kindergarten children by ensuring that they had access to a familiar and supportive peer as they commenced school;
2. provide leadership and mentoring training and experience for older primary students;
3. engage teacher education students in an educationally sound, collaborative community interaction; and
4. promote the concept of transition to school as a community event, involving a range of stakeholders.

As preparation for the buddy program, parents of children who would start school the following year, as well as some of the children, participated in informal conversational interviews about the issues they thought the children would face as they started school and identified areas where assistance may be necessary to help children adjust to school. The Year 5 students participated in discussions about starting school and all completed a written "Application for a position as a Kindy buddy". The teacher education students participated in a series of classes focusing on current research and practice relating to the transition to school, drawing particularly on the work of the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

The buddy program was designed as an inclusive program, involving all Year 5 students at the two schools. This promoted the notion that caring for new Kindergarten children was a responsibility to be shared across the school community and also provided an opportunity for all students to access training in communication and interactions skills. This was underpinned by the belief that some of the Year 5 students who struggled at school could benefit from experiences in which they could demonstrate leadership and mastery. Hence, all Year 5 students were invited to participate in the buddy training program.

The program drew heavily on the Stirling model of buddy programs (Conn, 2001) and on buddy programs already operating in schools. Despite this, it was clear that the program needed to be tailored to the contexts of the two schools. There was no assumption that a program that operated effectively elsewhere could be implemented without change in the schools involved.

Buddy training

Two training days were held where the Year 5 students (big buddies) worked with the teacher education students. One training day was held in each school, with participants travelling to the other school for one of the days. To mark the significance of the program, all participants received a t-shirt and cap identifying them as a “Kindy buddy, 2005”. The aim was to treat the Year 5 students as responsible members of the school community.

Teacher education students made familiarisation visits to the schools and met with school staff and some of the Year 5 students prior to the training days. In groups of two or three, they planned a range of activities over the two days that covered introduction, communication and cooperation activities as well as prompting Year 5 students to recall their own start to school and thinking about how they could help new children start school. The teacher education students were responsible for designing activities, identifying resources, implementing and evaluating their involvement in the training days. An outline of one of the training days is listed below:

Training Day 1

- 8:30 Preparation
- 9:30 Students from both schools arrive
 - Welcome assembly
 - Teacher education students take responsibility for their groups
- 10:00 Introduction games
- 11:00 Morning tea
- 11:30 Cooperation/communication activities
- 12:15 Thinking about starting school
- 1:00 Lunch and play (lunch provided by the host school)
- 1:45 Conclude assembly
 - Distribution of t-shirts and caps
 - Looking forward to next week
- 2:00 School students depart
 - Clean up
 - Debrief and planning for next week

The second training day included numerous activities organised by the student teachers for their groups as well as a guest speaker and a ceremony, where participants were presented

with a certificate nominating them as a “Kindy Buddy, 2005”. Presentations were made by the Dean of the relevant college of the University of Western Sydney. Local press attended the event.

Each group of student teachers had responsibility for 11-12 Year 5 students, some from each of the participating schools. The same groups worked together across the two training days which were one week apart. While there was some commonality in the activities planned, each group of student teachers planned activities for their own group. One group planned the following activities:

Day 1

Warm up activity Captain’s Coming
Introduction games Pair and Share – students find out five things about each other that they have in common and report to the group.
Celebrity heads – using information from Pair and Share, the students become the celebrities.

Cooperation/communication games

Obstacle course – students arrange course and work in pairs (one blindfolded) to negotiate the course.

Thinking about starting school

Brainstorm students’ recollections of their own start to school and record as a web.

Photo Album – students select a printed photo frame and draw something in it that reminds them of their first day at school.

Day 2

Thinking about buddies

Re-cap of brainstorm from last week.

Discussion – what makes a good buddy? Record key words on cards, place on a chart and discuss which of the cards is most important.

What will a buddy do in my school?

Role play of scenarios buddies may encounter at school.

Photo Album – add to albums something that reflects being a good buddy.

After the training days

The buddy training program operated in the final school term for the year, just before the transition to school programs for new Kindergarten children commenced. Following the buddy training days, the big buddies participated in a range of ways in those transition programs. Children about to start school were introduced to their buddies early in the transition programs, and the buddies took responsibility for showing them around the school and staying with them during some transition sessions. In following weeks, they greeted the new children and spent time with them in the playground. The Year 5 big buddies very proudly wore their “Kindy Buddy 2005” t-shirts and caps, describing how these made sure the new children could identify them in the playground.

Matching of big and little buddies was approached differently in the two schools. In one school, buddies were matched on the basis of cultural background, and in the other school,

language was the basis for matching buddies. Gender was also considered, with the rationale that toilets and toileting were often the cause of great apprehension for children starting school and having a big buddy who could accompany a little buddy to the right toilets was important. Buddies were involved in the new school year, again greeting new children and families and providing a familiar face within the school. Big buddies also spent time in the Kindergarten classrooms, participating in activities with the little buddies.

Program evaluation

The evaluation of the buddy training program used several data sources: the big buddies, school staff involved in the program, student teachers, and, to a lesser extent, little buddies. For example, focus group interviews were held with groups of the big buddies, both before and after the training program; big buddies were asked to complete written applications for the training program and evaluations of the program; school staff involved in the organisation and planning of the buddy training program participated in individual interviews with the researchers; student teachers provided written evaluations of the program and the little buddies participated in focus group discussions both with and without their big buddies, as well as providing drawings of their first weeks at school. These multiple sources, types and methods for the collection of data provide the necessary triangulation for corroborating the evidence (Creswell, 2005).

Data from big buddies

Big buddies were asked to complete a written evaluation of the training days and to comment on how they thought they would make a good buddy. These evaluations were remarkably positive and insightful. The big buddies commented mainly on the activities, but also about feeling special because they travelled to another school and had lunch, as well as receiving their t-shirts and caps. Other positive comments related to working with the teacher education students, again with a sense that they were being treated as 'special'. Representative comments from the evaluations included the following (original spelling and punctuation has been maintained).

What parts of the training days did you like best? Why?

When we had to write a letter to our buddy, because it was fun decorating it with colourful things!! (Neda).

I liked the first day the best because we played a lot of games and did some work on how did we feel when we started kindy (Aneritta).

I like all the activities because it is fun and it makes me feel like helping people (Tony).

The first training day was fun because I got a new friend (Steven).

I got to learn how to play, comfort and act around kindergarten children and I liked that because I didn't have a buddy and anyone to comfort me so I want my kindy buddy to have the best buddy (Jenny).

What parts of the training days did you like least? Why?

When we had to stop to have lunch because we were having much fun (Angie).

Acting. Because I am not good at it (Roger).

I didn't like the second day because when we had lunch they served us cold chicken and salad (Aneritta).

I didn't like the parts when some of the year 5 buddies were noisy (Jenny).

The last day because we had to write stuff (Jet).

Which parts of the days do you think will help you to be a good buddy? Why?

I am a best buddy because of the two teachers, they help me to be a best buddy in the hole world (Jonathan).

When Merlin [guest speaker] came and started speaking I learned a lot because he said all the stuff that I wasn't sure of (Sultan).

Painting because little kids like to paint (Rachael).

Learning about saveing little kids from bullies. So if a new kid comes and gets bullied I will go and tell the teacher (Marcus).

The parts that had no writing or spelling because the kindy kids are not that good at writing and spelling (Sami).

What did you learn from the buddy training days?

That always remember that we are the big kids so we look after them (Angie).

That the games we played was not for fun, it was for cheering up our kindy buddy for next year (Neda).

It's like having a child (James).

How hard it is when kindergarten people gust come (Roger).

How to make a new kinder feel welcome (Theo).

I lernt that kindy need lots of help (Mohamed).

I learned how the kindergarten would feel e.g. scared, lonely, terrified and sad (Chirag).

I learnt how to be a good buddy and I learnt to be cooperative (Jasmine).

A buddy doesn't let kids get hurt in the playground (Sam).

One child added the following comment to his evaluation of the program: "Thankyou for organising this buddy training day for us thankyou a lot".

The comments of the big buddies indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to participate in activities that may not be present in the upper primary school to the same extent as in early years of school. These activities include painting, playing games, using play dough or clay, decorating and drawing—all things that could be described as suitable for younger children. As they engaged in these activities, the big buddies made connections between the task and their future buddies, suggesting that they would need to help the little buddies and look out for them, especially in the playground.

These positive sentiments remained at the beginning of the new school year, when the big buddies were observed interacting with their little buddies. Their comments reflect an element of looking out for their little buddies, as well as the realisation that the big buddies may not be needed as much as little buddies become more confident at school.

He was really worried at the start but we went to the special buddies place (Mohamed).

It was good when she didn't need me any more but I was sad (Rosita).

Elements of the buddy training days that were least liked by the big buddies included the lunch provided and the disruptive behaviour of some of their peers. It is important to note that food featured in a number of the evaluations, as the second training day occurred during

Ramadan and approximately 30 of the big buddies were fasting. Provision was made for these students to have their lunch break in a separate area of the school (away from the food) and to have access to some special activities in the computer room. At the end of the day these students were invited to take their lunch packages home so that they could eat them at a later time.

Data from school staff

School staff who were involved in the buddy training program were asked to reflect on its value. Comments included:

I thought the two days were marvellous for numerous reasons. The collegiality of the students from uni, how they seem to be able to work together in teams and plan suitable activities for the kids ...some of them were absolutely incredible. The students involved...the feedback is very positive ... they gained a lot out of it. For orientation days, we've had a group of buddies ...they actually had their shirts on and support[ed] new buddies, which they found very enjoyable ... it was evident that the training they had received certainly was applicable for the things, the strategies they should have been employing with those young children. Richie was in the playground with these two little boys, one on each hand and he was very pleased with himself for how he'd managed this situation because one of the boys was a little bit boisterous. So he was really pleased ... (Principal)

I know my Year 5s really enjoyed it. When it's Fridays or Wednesdays and they've got to go up with their buddies, they're very quick to be there. There's no "Off you go, hurry up.". They're there, they're excited. Always in their clothes [buddy t-shirts] so they're obviously thinking about it. And they come back and they're on a bit of a high. They come back and they talk about their buddies and when their buddies don't show up and they come back to the room early they're disappointed. (Year 5 teacher).

The buddies we've had before haven't connected until the new year. So this is the first time it's happened and I think that was a great advantage. So.. the kids and parents when they arrive next year are going to be matched up with a buddy they'd got to know and the whole point of that is that there's familiarity, comfort and so on ... the buddies before tended to be ... we haven't allocated them one on one, they've tended to be helpers and maybe have changed day by day. Now we've got the one on one match, that's going to be better too. (Principal)

Data from teacher education students

Teacher education students commented on the challenge of engaging with a group of students over the two days, as well as the sense of achievement at the end of the two days. Over half of the teacher education students were enrolled in an early childhood teacher education program, and so expected to work with children aged from birth to 8 years. Students in Year 5, aged 10-11 years, were sometimes described as "confronting" and "challenging". The teacher education students described having to use a wide range of strategies to engage with these students, some of which were new to them. Teacher education students described feeling "nervous" about their role in the program. By the end of the buddy training program, most described themselves in terms such as "excited" and "pleased to have been able to achieve a great deal" through the program. Sometimes the activities planned worked very well and extended well past the allocated time. Other times, the teacher education students commented

that they had not realised “we would need to have so many back up ideas for when things don’t work”.

Particularly challenging for the teacher education students was the discipline of children. In all preparation meetings, it had been established that the classroom teachers would be supervising the students, and that their role, rather than that of the teacher education students, involved discipline. In most situations, this was the case, however there were occasions when, with no classroom teacher in sight, students pushed a range of boundaries. Teacher education students tended to respond appropriately, or to seek out assistance. In their reflections on such situations some teacher education students noted that this experience confirmed their desire to work with younger children. Others were very pleased to report that strategies they had used on previous occasions with younger children worked just as well with older children.

Overall, the teacher education students commented on the practical nature of the program, while realising that this was based on the theoretical backing of the Starting School Research Project. They commented positively on the opportunities to interact with school principals and school staff at the level of partnership (rather than as a student teacher). Also important was the support they received from the peers in their own group—their own collaboration and cooperation was enhanced. Most also indicated that they felt better equipped to enter schools as a result of their participation in the program.

Data from little buddies

At the beginning of the new school year, several little buddies were asked to tell the researchers about starting school and their buddies. All were very positive about their big buddies, and many sought proximity to them as much as possible. There were comments about “feeling happy” with the big buddies, a general sense of reassurance where they could seek out big buddies if they were not sure of something, as well as comments about “feeling safe at big school and in the playground” because of the big buddies. In drawings of what they liked about school, the little buddies drew pictures of themselves with their buddies.

Improvements suggested during the evaluation of the buddy training program

In addition to the very positive feedback from school students, teacher education students, and school staff, a number of possible improvements to the program were identified

Working with buddies

In some situations where big buddies and little buddies were combined, such as during the transition program or at the beginning of the school year, teachers commented that classrooms could become very crowded and sometimes disruptive. While planning to have the buddies together during the first part of the school year has many advantages, working out how to do this within the limited space resources of some schools can present challenges.

Besides space, there were other issues raised about the continuing working together of the big and little buddies. In one school, the plan was to have the buddies spend time together each morning of the new school year for at least two weeks, as an aid to settling in to school each day. Big buddies would then return to their own classroom and meet their little buddies for recess and lunch. One of the issues identified as a result of this process was the importance of the big buddies spending time on their own work projects during class time and in their own friendship groups during the breaks.

Not only did the big buddies build important relationships with their little buddies but they also strengthened their relationships with their peers. In both schools, there are plans to continue to support these relationships by planning regular times for the big buddies to get together as a buddy group. How this happens will vary in each school, but could involve some specified time each week where buddies meet and interact. The Stirling model (Conn, 2001) on which this program is based has an ongoing component where big buddies meet regularly to discuss their interactions and ways to engage with their little buddies, as well as reflection time to consider their own role. This will be the basis of the practice in at least one of the New South Wales schools.

Matching buddies

How big and little buddies are matched is an important aspect of a buddy program. Both schools indicated that there was much to consider. In one school where a number of children started school with limited English, the matching was based on language and gender. In the other school, culture was the major consideration, with buddies matched on the basis of similar cultural background. However, in this same school, there was also an effort to mix some groups of students, such as Muslim and Christian Arabic-speaking students, as a means of promoting understanding and interaction.

Numbers of buddies

In each school, there were more big buddies than little buddies. This meant that some little buddies had two big buddies, or in some cases, that big buddies did not get a little buddy. One challenge that emerges is how to engage students who do not have buddies in some other positive ways to support peer relationships and mentoring. Some teachers felt that participation in the buddy program should be based on good behaviour, whereas others indicated that some of the children who were most challenging in their own classroom were among the best buddies.

Funding

The program outlined in this paper was made possible because of a funding grant received from the University of Western Sydney. This was a one-off grant, so the program is not the subject of recurrent funding. While many aspects of the program can be accommodated within a school, the involvement of university students, access to wider resources and the provision of special elements, such as t-shirts, caps and catering, may not be possible. Given the positive responses to the program, the researchers and the schools are keen to find additional sources of support for the future refinement of the program and work is continuing in one of the schools to source funding from the local community. However, despite the lack of on-going funding, both schools are considering ways to incorporate elements of the program within their existing buddy programs and transition to school programs.

Conclusion

Starting school is a 'big deal' for children, families, educators and communities (Dockett & Perry, 2004). It is particularly a 'big deal' if the transition is taking place from a cultural and socio-economic family and community background that is not congruent with the white middle-class ethos and history of mainstream education practice, as was the case for most of the children starting school in the two schools involved in the buddy training program being

evaluated in this paper. Each of the four aims of this program has been evaluated with the conclusions summarised in the following paragraphs.

Aim 1. To promote a positive start to school for new Kindergarten children by ensuring that they had access to a familiar and supportive peer as they commenced school.

The members of the staff from both schools indicated that having trained big buddies had help promote particularly positive starts to school for the new Kindergarten children. The little buddies also indicated the positive feelings of safety and assurance that they felt because of the presence of their big buddies. To the little buddies, big buddies were important people to be near as they started school. These findings reinforce those of Dennison (2000) and Hektner et al. (2003).

Aim 2. To provide leadership and mentoring training and experience for older primary students.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the big buddies who participated in the buddy training think of themselves as leaders within the school community and see a major element of their role as looking out for younger children. While there are not yet data to determine the impact of this over a full school year, there is evidence to indicate that the positive reactions of the little buddies and school staff positions the role of big buddy as important and respected. Such positioning has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of school communities as caring and responsive places (Noddings, 1992).

Aim 3. To engage teacher education students in an educationally sound, collaborative community interaction.

The teacher education students who engaged in the buddy training program not only refined their own teaching skills, but also learned a lot about schools, school staff, 'older' children and working cooperatively. They made a very positive impression on the school staff, and this in turn, enhanced their own confidence as they entered the teaching profession. Their engagement in a collaborative program clearly flagged that teachers are expected to work with a range of stakeholders in developing relevant and meaningful teaching and learning situations. The training program also provided the student teachers with positive experience of community service learning, a strong feature of current university programs.

Aim 4. To promote the concept of transition to school as a community event, involving a range of stakeholders.

While it is not new to consider transition to school programs in this way (Dockett & Perry, 2001), the big buddies and the teacher education students commented on the importance of community recognition of their role within the buddy training program. Big buddies were proud to receive certificates, t-shirts and caps, and pleased to see their schools and themselves reported so positively in the press. Teacher education students appreciated recognition from the university, through the presence of the Dean, as well as the media coverage. There was a sense that sometimes the 'good' stories about education are overlooked in favour of the more sensational stories, and that they were all part of one of the 'good' stories.

All groups of stakeholders emerged from the program with a renewed commitment to supporting young children in their transition to school. The combination of peer mentoring and support through a buddy program, training to enhance skills in leadership, and collaboration with teacher education students has resulted in an innovative program that has built a wide range of community supports and connections. At each level of the program, participants had opportunities to demonstrate and to build upon their strengths. While there is much to be studied about each element of the program, we believe that programs such as this provide evidence of the value of community collaboration around the transition to school.

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