An Exploration of a Mentoring Programme for At-Risk Adolescents in the West Midlands, UK

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KEYWORDS: Mentoring programme; Adolescent; Schools; United Kingdom; Qualitative research

Acknowledgements
We thank the charities, Dr Rahul Jalil, the programme leaders, the mentors, Ben* (anonymized) and the youth participants for their contribution to this research study.

Open Research Practices Statement
The primary data for this research are not available due to compromising anonymity of research participants, along with a lack of consent for data sharing from participants.

Word count: 6065 words

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Abstract

Extra-curricular activities, such as playing sport and participating in mentoring programmes, have physical and mental health benefits for individuals. For adolescents particularly, nurturing these interests have potential for positive outcomes in academic attainment and personal development, an increase to self-esteem, and positive development of relationship skills. This study explored the understanding and attitudes that 11 adolescents, aged 13 to 16 years, enrolled on a West Midlands-based charity's sports and mentoring programme, had towards their participation through the form of semi-structured focus groups. Thematic Analysis was performed, and three key themes were identified: (i) *Positive changes to their behaviour*, (ii) *Connections with the mentors*, and (iii) *The difference the mentoring programme has made to their lives*. The findings demonstrated that the mentoring programme was beneficial and had favourable impact on the adolescents involved, and support the need for such programmes to be further developed and promoted for youth to access.

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Mentoring for adolescents has been outlined as a process to aid transition to adulthood through assistance from an experienced guide (Gowdy et al., 2022; Philip & Hendry, 2000) and to provide the child with emotional support and positive attention (Karcher, 2005), through matching these at-risk adolescents with positive role models (Meyer & Bouchey, 2010). There are no agreed-upon definitions of mentoring but DuBois and Karcher (2005) and Busse et al. (2018) suggest that mentoring consists of three essential components: (1) the mentor will have greater experience than the mentee, (2) the mentor will assist in the development of the mentee through guidance, and (3) there should be an emotional connection between the two. The relationship between mentor and mentee should be based on trust and support (Busse et al., 2018; Rhodes, 2005) as they are to work together to facilitate positive change and growth.

Mentoring programmes have been shown to benefit ‘at-risk’ adolescents who are experiencing economic and environmental disadvantage and/or individual risk factors (Busse et al., 2018; DuBois et al., 2002; Freedman, 1992). For example, adolescents participating in mentoring programmes on the basis of being ‘at-risk’, have been shown to increase their future educational aspirations, improve employment prospects, and decrease the impact of negative environmental risk factors (Keating et al., 2002; Kolar & McBride, 2011; Resnjanskij et al., 2021; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). Mentoring programmes have also been found to be effective in preventing disengaged adolescents from being excluded or dropping out of school (Russell, 2007). Cloth et al., (2023) noted that at-risk youth are more likely to receive mentoring guidance, and that this may be a stepping-stone for additional support services that are necessary for their future.

The success of such interventions however is not simply the presence of a mentor, but rather in the manner that the relationship is nurtured and maintained; a trusting relationship between the mentor and the adolescent develops where the mentee knows that taking risks and making mistakes is permitted within this relationship (Petitpas et al., 2008). Rhodes (2002) suggests that trust, understanding, feeling liked and respected are key for establishing successful partnerships, and Meyer and Bouchey (2010) link frequency of contact with mentors to increased self-worth in male mentees, but did not find this with female mentees. Spencer (2007) notes that male mentee-male mentor relationships facilitated connectedness, safe places for vulnerability and management of emotions.

Mentoring can be useful as it encourages growth and confidence in both academic and social settings (Herrera et al., 2011). A typology of school-based mentoring relationship quality was developed by McMorris et al., (2018): a 'tight match' mentor-mentee relationship indicates closeness, communication, engagement, and compatibility as significant elements. Mentors that also have positive opinions towards adolescents are often those that develop strong relationships with their mentees. A 'tough match' mentor-mentee relationship lacks emotional closeness and communication. Busse et al. (2018) note however that some mentees do not recognise mentoring for what it is, but rather as coaching or befriending, likely due to the nature of the developing relationship. If mentees feel there is a lack of a 'friendship' quality, then this can hinder the overall point of the mentoring; Busse et al. (2018) suggest that crossing boundaries between different aspects of the mentee's life can help to make long lasting changes. Austin et al. (2020) further identified that youth who connect with their mentors have improvements in relationships with their parents or caregivers, more likely to seek guidance and more involvement in extracurricular activities, which is especially beneficial for at-risk youth in reducing unwanted behaviours.

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Social engagement through extracurricular activities like sport, is associated with increased friendship networks (Schaefer et al., 2011), so physical activity for children and adolescents should also be advocated, given the strong association with improvements in health, increased self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms experienced (Eime et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2020; Kabiri et al., 2022). Incorporating sport activities, for example, into mentoring initiatives can promote and facilitate the notion of social inclusion, especially for marginalised populations (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Jones et al., 2020; Kelly, 2010). Gilligan (1999) suggested that participating in sport activities can help with realization of potential, build self-esteem, strengthen mental health and open new relationships. Perkins and Noam (2007) advocate for development programmes for youth that include sport, as these programmes can assist the development of connectivity to others and skills that they can implement within their communities, promoting growth. Bruening et al. (2009) suggest a combination of mentoring with physical activity, learning life skills and encouraging healthy life choices for effective development. Fuller et al. (2013) note that US-based ethnic minority mentees for after-school programmes chose to participate so they can be involved in the sport activities, but also because they identified the programme as a safe-space for them to engage with others and stay out of trouble. Research exploring physical activity for adults has produced similar results (Garner-Purkis et al., 2020; Langham-Walsh, 2023; Mbabazi et al., 2022).

To date there has been little research into out-of-school mentoring programmes within a UK-setting, and so this research attempts to provide *information* on how these types of programmes are understood. Most of the research into mentoring often explores the impact from the mentor perspective or attempts to measure how successful the programme has been. This study instead explores the value and impact of mentoring from the mentee perspective,

with the present research question being : “How do UK adolescents understand their participation and development in a mentoring programme?”

Method

The study was conducted in conjunction with a family and relationship charity and a West Midlands city-centre sport-based charity. The latter are an independent organisation that uses sport and physical activity to promote improving lives within the community. They run open-access youth development programmes that utilise sport activities alongside mentoring to help adolescents in the city area to fulfil their potential. They work with their city council, schools, and other local organisations to reach as many children as possible to prevent anti-social behaviour, encourage personal development skills and promote social inclusion. Their specific school programmes with at-risk children aged 11-16 years provide a safe mentoring space. All the children enrolled on this programme have either been excluded from school or are on the brink of exclusion. The programmes can vary between lasting for 6 to 12 weeks at a time, or by implementing summer social initiatives within the children’s local community. The embedded programmes can consist of group sessions of classroom-based activities, where the children are encouraged to work individually and together on projects, and practical activities using sport, such as football and basketball, to foster more positive connections through teamwork. Each school determined when the sessions would be scheduled around regular educational activities where some days consisted of both mentoring and sport sessions. The programme is young person led, so activities are informed by the young people, changing based on the needs and interests of the group as the weeks go on, which are then formulated for future iterations. The summer social initiatives have sport as their focus, with football, basketball, tennis and badminton offered for local young people to join in, meet with others and develop connections through a teamwork setting. All mentors

employed by the organisation participate in the summer social initiatives and offer informal mentoring through coaching in the sport activities. The mentors also participated in the sports activities, where appropriate, to connect more with the young people.

Mentors employed by the organisation are often those with lived experience themselves, have been mentors with other organisations or have been mentored previously in the programme themselves. Participants enrolled in the mentoring programme are assigned a mentor that they can have one-to-one sessions with and have larger group sessions with a variety of different mentoring staff. This organisation worked with the academic team and allowed access to their mentoring programme that was embedded within schools, due to the timing of the research taking place and the consistency of the sessions being held

Design

Focus groups were conducted as they allow for individuals to interact with each other to better illustrate their understanding (Litosseliti, 2003), but are also more time efficient and less obtrusive than one-to-one interviews, particularly as these are children (<16 years old) and so may feel intimidated in a one-to-one setting with an interviewer. This also meant it would be perceived as less formal; some of the individuals have had experience with the police and being interviewed with intent, whereas a focus group setting allowed for a more relaxed environment to elicit information (Gibson, 2007). A semi-structured interview schedule was chosen as the optimal way to engage with participants, to allow for both focused and spontaneous discussion.

Participants

Two education providers in the West Midlands area who enrolled students into the mentoring programme volunteered to participate in the study; School A was a suburban institution offering mainstream secondary school education and School B was an inner-city

institution offering alternative provisions. The participants from School A were near to expulsion, and those in School B had already been expelled from mainstream secondary education. Of approximately 40 individuals of mixed sex who were eligible and invited to participate, 11 male students volunteered, of a range of ethnicities. These participants were split into three focus groups; four students from School A were in the first focus group, and seven students from School B were in the second and third focus groups. Participant ages were between 12 and 16 years. More specific demographic information was not collected in order to preserve anonymity, per ethical approval from the authors' institution. The research team consisted of two white female lecturers from [redacted for anonymity], who conducted the interviews with the aid of one of the programme mentors, Ben, who all participants had had regular mentoring contact with over the previous 12 months. Ben has been a mentor with the programme for at least 2 years, has lived within the area for a number of years and is older than 30 years. Ben acknowledged where he had been in a similar situation to the participants when he was younger, demonstrating lived experience.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was created, revised, and agreed upon by the research team and two representatives from each of the charities. Questions consisted of "What kind of things have you been doing in the programme?", "What is your mentor like? And what things have they been helping you with?" and "What was it about the programme do you feel has helped you?". Two Dictaphones were used to record all three focus groups to ensure all discussion was captured. The participating schools provided a quiet room on-campus to conduct the interviews so the participants would be in a familiar environment.

Procedure

The interviews took place during scheduled mentorship programme hours to ensure the students did not miss any school classes. Each student had been given permission by a

parent but were separately asked if they were happy to continue participating in the study and to sign a separate assent form. The interviews started with the researchers informally introducing themselves, what the study was about and providing an overview of how the session should go and offering an opportunity to answer questions from the students. A mini activity was included where the participants were asked to write down what a relationship meant to them, where they could work together or alone. This activity followed a similar structure to some of their mentoring sessions of giving them something to focus on, allow for their opinions to be considered and for a group discussion to be had. As the mentoring involves developing their communication skills, confidence, and connections to others, discussing relationships allowed for reflection on these throughout the programme.

The participants were told they could withdraw at any point, and that as this session was all about their understanding, they could speak however they wished. The focus group interviews varied in length; 48 minutes, 49 minutes, and 71 minutes. The participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at the end and how to get in contact with the researchers, with the information being provided through their mentors and the school.

The study was approved by the first and third researchers' Faculty Ethics Committee in accordance with the British Psychological Society's guidelines (2018), ref: redacted for anonymity.

Reflexivity

Our positioning as the researchers should be acknowledged; we are two white British women conducting a study with participants of a range of ethnicities, which will have impacted and influenced the responses we received. The West Midlands is the second largest UK city outside of London, and the second most ethnically diverse in England and Wales (ONS, 2011). We are aware that our ethnicity may not have matched all of our participants' and so our approach was to be as informal as possible, but still respect the fact that we were

outsiders and strangers. Participants from School A were receptive more quickly than those from School B, but those from School B were more open and willing to share their experiences with us. It was clear throughout the sessions of the respect the participants had for the mentors, to the point where it was genuine and sincere when they referred to the mentors as their friends, and for each other. The participants also enjoyed explaining some of the terminology they used when referring to situations and people, which allowed for a more open discourse with the researchers.

Analytic Strategy

Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the most viable way to elicit key information surrounding the understandings of participants and their mentorship programme. TA is a theoretical framework for recognising and identifying patterns across datasets that concentrates on *what* is said rather than *how* it is said, with focus groups it is important to notice patterns *within* a specific group setting as well as across all the groups. Analysis was conducted from a latent inductive viewpoint and followed the six-steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013): data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and then writing the report. The sessions had an impact on the research team, and so data analysis was conducted with both researchers; the group data was split between the two, read and then coded separately before discussing the codes with each other to ensure biases and preconceived assumptions were not infiltrating the data. This allowed for the data to 'speak' for itself. Numerous codes were identified surrounding behaviour, interactions with mentors, identity as an individual, youth and innocence, and relationships.

Findings

Whilst the mentoring aspect was part of a sports-based charity and included elements of sport, it quickly became clear that for the mentees involved, the sport side was for fun, letting off steam, and an opportunity to be away from the classroom. Most of the participants referred to the classroom activities and 1-2-1 sessions with their mentors as their actual mentoring time, possibly due to the formality of the activities.

One of the key aspects of the programme is that the mentors work with the participants about respect and trust, by ensuring that all are mindful of each other when holding group activities and sessions by not interrupting, allowing individuals to speak honestly without repercussion and not raising their voices at each other. All participants reported how the mentor programme had made (i) *Positive changes to their behaviour*, (ii) *Connections with the mentors*, and (iii) *The difference the mentoring programme has made to their lives*.

Positive changes to their behaviour

A common aspect throughout the focus groups was the impact the mentoring programme had on their behaviour. Most of the participants explained how the programme had changed how they view their previous and current actions, and how the sessions they had with their mentors enabled development of this recognition for future behaviour. The addition of the mentor being involved meant that when reflecting, they were seeking confirmation that they had changed as people. Participants identified how they utilised what they had learned in their mentoring by reflecting on their past behaviour, acknowledging the changes, and recognizing the consequences of conduct:

> *"…my behaviour has changed like in year 7, I wasn't the best behaved, but now obviously I've, like, I've got my ideas and I've learnt to obviously not*

do what I used to do. It has helped me a lot." Focus Group (FG) 1 Participant

The participants were often explaining the self-impact that this new behaviour had, development of their self-awareness, and how the work the mentors have put into the programme had made them realise the potential consequences of reacting to difficult situations:

"…it's helped me like, like think before I say something because you don't know what like, it like it might impact and what impact it has on other people. And like, like not getting involved in something I'm not supposed to be involved in." FG1 Participant

"…I still do my thing, ain't it, but I just don't do it... I don't, I don't do it as much as I used to, 'cause of what I can get myself into, and it can mess up my future, and stuff like that, so I am being more careful about what I do, and who I do it with." FG2 Participant

Most of the participants discussed these changes with ease and demonstrated gratitude towards the mentors for working with them to show how their behaviour was going to impact on their future, and the potential consequences. Some changes to their behaviour centred on their understanding of how to deal with emotions, particularly if it was possible that the situation could affect their future. The mentees alluded to having the physical time of sports activities to reframe their environment, use up some energy and be more friendly towards each other as teammates.

Connections with the mentors

All participants talked about the development and characteristics of relationships that they had with key people in their life, but strongest connections were suggested with the mentors. The participants had weekly group session with the mentors, and designated time for 1-2-1 sessions, suggesting frequency help with this connection. Participants demonstrated knowledge of applying mentoring teachings from team-building exercise, such as sport, to their general lives and relationships:

"…it is not just you go out have a kick around because, and that it is just a way to get out of a lesson, they do it so like you learn teamwork, respect for your teammates and stuff like that." FG1 participant

Many of the participants also discussed how they view the mentors as a key relationship and separate to the adults in their lives, as friends and individuals they can trust, who can offer a 'safe' space to discuss issues:

"…if I need to speak to him, I could speak to him, so... I think that's, that's made my experience here better, and, like, really... much... 'cause I've got someone there to speak to, or if I feel like something's gonna happen, I can just go speak to him, and he'll... I don't know, calm me down, or something" FG2 participant

There is a view of the mentor accompanying the sessions as a constant, suggesting reliance and trust is present, which is important due to the gravity of some of the situations these participants experience in their everyday life. The participants demonstrated stark contrasts in how they viewed educational instructors to mentors, as they prefer someone they know to open up to, and some of the teachers may not offer that opportunity to them, either through lack of availability or resources, or disconnect in being able to relate to them. The participants

want a connection where they can talk honestly, to be guided for educational and personal development, and have someone who can support them too:

> *"…because we're in here and [mentor] doesn't really like tell us off I think like, there is like, I don't know there is just like something there where we can just get on and we speak about loads of stuff that I couldn't with my teachers." FG1 participant*

The participant suggested that as the mentor chooses to talk through unacceptable behaviours, they find it easier to approach them. The distinction made between mentors and teachers suggests there is a barrier of accessing support, due to concerns of reprimanding for unacceptable behaviour when the teacher is unaware of why. Having an opportunity to build that connection with a mentor, who they do not necessarily view as an official educator, suggests that the participants of the mentor programme need a non-judgemental authoritative figure who can guide them.

The difference the mentoring programme has made to their lives

All of the participants talked about what they had learnt, how they could deal with various situations and what they enjoyed. Some of the participants focused on the mentors' guidance and advice when not at the programme or at school:

> *"…yeah 'cause they like tell us like how to be like cautious on the streets because, and not to make stupid decisions." FG1 participant*

> *"…it made me more confident and it made me adapt to the like different behaviours, also, it helped me make like new friends and made me a bit more confident in talking to people." FG1 participant*

The mentors worked with each participant to be more mindful and aware of harmful scenarios to make better decisions. The participants made it clear that they were appreciative of being spoken to by people who have been in similar situations to them and how to overcome or move on from these types of harmful scenarios. Being able to access advice and support from various team members of the programme for different situations means that the participant can deduce who would be best for a scenario based on the experience they have had. Other participants also noted that having the ability to talk to the mentors has helped them progress for the future:

> *"…like they teach us like life lessons, okay. So, I'm always late so whenever I talk to [mentor] or [mentor], they're always saying to me like, I need to be on time and like, they're giving me real life examples of like when I leave school, do you know what I mean? Like, they help you with things there and say, like behaviour, or if an incident came up." FG3 participant*

The opportunity for the mentors to explain why certain things are important to help with their future has shown them how to change their behaviour to be more appropriate, and for someone to guide them when something does not quite go to plan and to offer support in a relatable way. From each of the focus groups, it was clear that all participants enjoyed the programme, not only in the content that was delivered to them during sessions, but also the ability for them to learn skills that are applicable outside the schooling environment.

Discussion

The research aimed to better understand the attitudes that adolescents have towards their participation and the skills they develop as part of a mentoring programme. The key

challenges and achievements of the programme demonstrate a need for someone they can connect to and trust, and who can guide them through challenges they face. They clearly valued the relationship they all had built with their mentors and appreciated the ability to talk with them about things outside of the school environment. A key finding from this was the relatability between the mentor and mentee about similar experiences, acknowledging mistakes without telling them off, and talking to them about how their behaviours had consequences in the long and short term. All the participants had developed key reflective and teamwork skills from engaging in the programme. This demonstrates that they learnt a new skill and created a space where they could talk about their mistakes and how to act differently in the future.

Mentoring programmes have been shown to be effective in the prevention of adolescents becoming disengaged from school (Russell, 2007) and for developing or providing support for their future (Cloth et al., 2023). Encouraging adolescents to think about the consequences of their behaviours, as shown from the participants in this study, may contribute to their sustained engagement in their education, and their future aspirations (Keating et al., 2002; Kolar & McBride, 2011; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). The findings from this research project support that the key features of a mentor-mentee relationship are closeness, communication, engagement and compatibility (Austin et al., 2020; McMorris et al., 2018), that trust within the mentor-mentee relationship is developed when making mistakes is considered normal (Petitpas et al., 2008), and that frequent contact increases self-worth (Meyer & Bouchey, 2010). The sporting element was also perceived as beneficial for their relationships with both their peers and mentors in creating connection with others and working as a team, which is consistent with Gilligan (1999) Petitpas et al. (2004), Perkins and Noam (2007), Bruening et al. (2009), Schaefer et al. (2011), Grossman et al. (2012) and Eime et al. (2013).

The study has both strengths and limitations: as a qualitative study, the sample size was small as the richness of the participants' understandings needed to come through and needed to be in their own words. Conducting research with a larger sample size would have only provided a very small snapshot of information from many participants. Overall, 11 participants were interviewed of an eligible 40 individuals, and all participants were male. This means that some of the findings cannot be applied to female mentees, as their views were not explored in this particular study. The findings therefore provide insight into a male understanding of the mentoring programme, and future research is needed to explore female perspectives. A key aspect that was noted throughout all of the focus groups was the need to be heard; many of the participants felt that the adults in their lives did not allow them to have a voice in the way they needed or wanted; by conducting this qualitatively, they were provided with an opportunity to discuss and evaluate the mentoring programme in their own way, and demonstrate personal responsibility over something they clear value highly. One of the key strengths was the inclusion of the mentor, Ben, in the focus groups as he helped to elicit key information from the participants that may not have been divulged had it been just the two researchers involved. Participants were able to direct answers and questions to him, instead of the researchers, allowing them to be comfortable and feel more secure in their sharing of experiences, but for everyone to still be involved in the discussion. It also meant an element of mentoring was included when some of the conversations became difficult or behaviour was mentioned that is against mentoring guidance, allowing these discussions to be viewed in real-time, meaning that the interactions between the mentors and mentees allowed for an extra layer of understanding when conducting the thematic analysis.

Future studies should also consider having a mentor present during interviews as observing the impromptu guidance was useful, as would witnessing mentoring sessions to help develop a relationship between the researchers and participants to make them feel more

comfortable. We would suggest that further research, with at-risk populations, is conducted to explore the individual contribution of the sport and mentoring components of similar programmes.

There are implications of the study findings for both practitioners and academics. Allowing young people to have a mentor with lived experience of the issues that they are facing can provide them with a source of support from someone who is not an authority position. This can encourage the young person to talk openly about their feelings and thoughts, reflecting on how to behave in the future.

Conclusion

The main finding from this study is that the mentoring programme was beneficial for the participants that were involved in the project. The mentoring was valued highly and mentor-mentee relationships, characterised by respect, trust and the ability to make mistakes, were developed. Despite the limitations surrounding the number of participants included in the study, the benefits of mentoring have been demonstrated consistently within the research literature. The findings suggest that the participants enjoyed the mentoring programme and consider it a useful inclusion in both their school life and personal lives.

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