Using community interaction theory to understand the effects of group mentoring on adolescents

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.26.1.34

Abstract This paper describes the outcomes for adolescents taking part in a 12-week group behavioural mentoring programme and possible causal mechanisms involved, using Law's (1981) Community Interaction Theory as a theoretical framework. The two-stage qualitative research with four groups of students aged 13–14 showed that there were changes to their understanding of self, their self-confidence, their ability to control emotions and behaviour and, importantly, changes in their career aspirations. Interacting with their mentors (adults from outside their previous communities) appeared to have a significant impact on them. The data suggests this was via the creation of a new community which moderated existing beliefs about who they were, and what opportunities were open to them. The mentors provided feedback, support and information, and were perceived as a credible and trusted role model. The study offers an application of Law's theory to the younger students it was developed for and provides evidence suggestive of the importance of interactions with wider communities in career development and widening participation, although future research should consider long-term follow-up of mentees.

Key words Group mentoring, impact, community interaction theory

Introduction

This paper describes an evaluation of a widening participation intervention employed in England with students aged 13–14 years old, aiming to identify initial participant outcomes and the causal mechanisms responsible for them. The increased focus on widening participation work across many countries acknowledges the need to reduce the number of young people not in education,

employment or training (NEET), raise aspirations and improve destinations for disadvantaged young people as they transition out from secondary education. An array of interventions can be delivered which include information, advice and guidance sessions, financial aid, experience and taster activities, academic and employability skill development, and mentoring (e.g. Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020).

Accompanying these interventions is an increased focus on evaluating interventions and programmes to understand what works, improve outcomes for the participants of these programmes, scale up programmes for wider delivery, and develop policy. Evaluations have demonstrated positive outcomes (e.g. Baines, Googh and Ng-Knight, 2022; Burgess, Horton and Moores, 2021; Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020; Martins, 2010). However, as Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) note, existing evidence is nearly always focused on students aged 16 or older and does not often explore or identify causal mechanisms. This paper addresses this issue by focusing on an intervention aimed at younger students (aged 13–14 years) and exploring causal mechanisms. It does this through the application of Law's (1981) Community Interaction Theory (CIT) to the people it was originally developed for – school age students.

Literature review

Bozeman and Feeney (2007) argue that group mentoring is characterised by:

1. A mentor who has more experience or knowledge than the mentees.
2. The sharing of knowledge, social capital and psychosocial support typically through informal communication.
3. The typical goal of career and/or personal development.

Mentoring features in many widening participation interventions. In Germany, a ten-week career mentoring programme was delivered to 46 secondary school students with the aim of supporting students with their vocational orientation (Jordan, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld, 2016). Those who received

career mentoring had improved career planning and decision making compared to a control group who did not receive the mentoring (Jordan, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld, 2016). In the USA, a meta-analysis was conducted by Dubois *et al.* (2011) to explore the effectiveness of 73 mentoring programmes for adolescents, concluding that mentoring programmes could improve outcomes in behavioural and academic domains of development.

Mentoring has traditionally been between one mentor and one mentee; however, there is growing evidence of the efficacy of group mentoring. Group mentoring may take the form of peer group mentoring, one mentor to many mentees, many mentors to one mentee and many-to-many mentoring. It has the obvious advantage of reduced unsuccessful mentor matching and lack of expertise (e.g. Huizing, 2012) and has been shown to support career development (e.g. Walkington, Vanderheide and Hughes, 2008). However, research has typically looked at group mentoring and adults; for example, group mentoring for career development has demonstrated positive outcomes such as increased salary (Dansky, 1996). There are fewer examples of group mentoring with younger participants; one notable exception was a study by Guenaga *et al.* (2022) who examined the impact of female role models in group mentoring of young girls. The group mentoring was able to improve the girls' opinions of vocational and science related careers.

These studies show the positive effects that mentoring can have on school attainment, career management skills and other behavioural measures.

It could be assumed that the causal mechanisms for career or self-development in group mentoring are the same as those responsible in one-to-one mentoring (for example, sharing of knowledge, experience and social capital [Bozeman and Feeney, 2007]), but there is of course a plethora of group dynamics which may also result in changes in behaviour (for example, Groupthink [Janis, 2008]). Groupthink occurs when the pressure to retain group consensus prevents individuals from presenting alternative thinking, attitudes or opinions (Janis, 2008). This is predominantly troublesome for groups or teams who are engaged in decision-making, but signs of Groupthink have been found in a wider range of group

settings (Baron, 2005) than was originally conceived. Indicators of groupthink are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Indicators of groupthink

Indicator	Interpretation
Invulnerability	Most members share an illusion of invulnerability which makes them prone to taking extreme risks or ignoring warnings.
Rationalisation	When team members convince themselves that, despite contradictory evidence, the prevailing belief is the right one.
Peer pressure	When a team member shares a contradictory belief or opinion, the rest of the team work together to pressure that person into complying with the group opinion.
Complacency	Prior success leads to the assumption that future decisions will be correct.
Stereotyping	Group member characteristics are seen more favourably than those of out-group members, and these negative perceptions are used to discredit them.
Censorship	Outputs are censored to ensure they support existing group opinions.
Illusion of unanimity	Reduced perceived ability to speak out makes group decisions feel unanimous.
Mindguards	Team members who appoint themselves as protectors of the team and who guard against information that is incongruous with existing team beliefs.

Source: Baron, R. S. (2005). So Right It's Wrong: Groupthink and the Ubiquitous Nature of Polarized Group Decision Making. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 37, pp. 219–253). Elsevier Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(05)37004-3

In a group mentoring context this could occur via one of the following mechanisms: conformity pressure; influence of the mentor; information limitation; group shared identity and aspirations. However, Groupthink can be avoided (e.g. Forsyth, 2018; Higgins and Kram, 2001). Mentors can actively work to prevent groupthink by encouraging independent thought, fostering an open and accepting environment where differing opinions are valued, and providing access to a wide range of information and perspectives about potential career paths. Moreover, changes in career aspirations are not inherently negative; a mentee may indeed discover a more fitting or

fulfilling career path through the collective exploration and discussion in a group mentoring setting (e.g. Gibson, 2004).

Alternative explanations for the positive effects group mentoring have on the development of self and career naturally include theories of career development. This paper focuses on one such theory – Law's Community-Interaction Theory (1981) – which is outlined below, followed by a rationale for its application.

Law (1981) built on the premise that career development needs to be viewed through the lens of the continual development of understanding of self and situation by the individual. He emphasised the mediating and modifying role of community in shaping the thoughts and decisions individuals make regarding careers. Modifying processes explain how neither self, nor situation, is static and why one individual may act differently from other members of the same group. Law argued that both the individual and societal structures influence career development and the impact of these is mediated and/or modified by community. Community is comprised from family, friend groups, neighbourhood, ethnic group and other groups the individual is a member of (Law, 1981).

Law (1981) articulates two processes that community interaction facilitates. Firstly, community can be viewed as a 'transmitter of motivation'. The influences of social groups (such as family, friends, neighbourhood and ethnicity) provide the individual with learning about the economy and labour market and about what responses are appropriate from people within their community. Secondly, the community is a 'modifier of social functioning'. Community-interaction processes both inform individuals about how society impacts on them *and* modify these effects. Knowledge, understanding and beliefs about social class are passed on to children through their families, but wider family groups, ethnic groups, friends and other social groups can challenge or strengthen these beliefs.

Not only is community a mediator and modifier for the influence of sociological structures, but it also has its own direct influences on career development (Law, 2009). Community places *expectations* on the individual, informing them of what is required and what is appropriate behaviour in the different

groups an individual is part of. Community can also provide *feedback* on career ideas and what is a good fit. In this context, feedback refers to 'the images that people can receive of themselves by their participation in those groups' (Law, 2009, p. 18). This feedback likely supports the formation or removal of career aspirations. Community can also offer *support* to individuals in the form of encouragement and reinforcement of career aspirations or choices, providing an opportunity to experience and learn about different careers and lifestyles. *Role models* in the community demonstrate to individuals what aspirations and outcomes might be viable. Finally, community can provide contacts and convey *information* about work in the form of 'impressions, images and data' (Law, 2009, p. 18), which might facilitate career achievements.

The Community-Interaction Theory (CIT) of career development has limited validation. Law (1981) described 'fragments of evidence' which showed that young adults benefit from the opportunity to interact with a range of adults who provide contacts in the community (Bazalgette, 1971; cited in Law, 1981, and Reed *et al.*, 1978; cited in Law, 1981). These findings echo those of the Behavioural Insights Team in 2016. They found that despite the proliferation of information available to young people today, they often develop aspirations from imagining themselves doing a job that family or friends do or what they see through personal exposure or the media.

More recently, Reid (2020) used Law's CIT as a lens to explore the career narratives of medical students from low Higher Education participation backgrounds. Direct influences as described in CIT appeared frequently across the data; 'expectations', 'feedback' and 'information' were particularly salient. The expectations teachers held for their students appeared to be important for students' decision-making. Feedback from peers, teachers and family inculcated career aspirations, and support was critical for these students to realise their aspirations. Crucially, support was more effective for career development when it came from individuals who were perceived to be knowledgeable or experienced in making the transition that the medical students were making (e.g. a returning student). There was less evidence of role-modelling in Reid's (2020) data,

but family, teachers and peers who were perceived as role models shared a similar background with the students.

CIT as a theoretical framework was believed to be an ideal lens through which to understand the processes and effects occurring in the present study. The programme was concerned with change in individuals through interactions in a new social community. The programme aimed to enable students to understand themselves, navigate the structural constraints they may face and begin thinking about their future careers. Therefore, a theoretical approach which explicitly describes the mechanisms by which career development occurs when individuals interact with others seemed pertinent. A further argument for its use is that it facilitated an exploration of the theory's ability to account for career development in school-aged children.

The mentoring programme

The programme was group behavioural mentoring of students (aged 13–14) attending secondary school in England, in a geographical area where progression to higher education was lower than expected and funded through the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)[i]. Teachers nominated students to take part. They targeted those at risk of permanent exclusion with high incidences of poor behaviour (including classroom removal and isolation), those with low school attendance, or those with significant safeguarding incidents that were affecting educational potential.

The programme aimed to develop the students' emotional intelligence, their attitudes towards themselves and their work, their behaviour, their social conduct and their career aspirations. In developing these skills, attitudes and career aspirations, the programme aimed to reduce challenging behaviour and school exclusions and 'inspire positive change' so that the students could fulfil their potential at school.

The mentoring programme was delivered over the course of 12 weeks to four groups of 10–15 students in 30- to 60-minute sessions. Within each session there were structured group activities and discussions which fell under three main themes

(see Table 2). Mentors would lead discussions on the topics in Table 2, encouraging the students to talk about themselves in relation to these topics. The mentors used coaching style questioning (open questions, probes and questions that elicited reflection) with the students to understand their contexts, challenges, experiences and perceptions. Mentors would then talk about these aspects in relation to their own lives. For example, one mentor shared her family history (one parent in prison and unstable family relationships) to explain why she had demonstrated challenging behaviour. Mentor's would then share the ways in which they had changed their behaviour, illustrating the people, resources, tools or interventions which had helped them change, and encouraged the students to develop ways to change their thinking and behaviour.

Table 2: Mentoring programme session content

Tackling challenging behaviour	**Creating a positive mindset**	**Raising aspirations**
• Controlling behaviour • Outburst control • Actions have consequences • Appropriate emotion release • Respect • De-escalation • Improving concentration	• Building resilience • Raising self-esteem • Healthy relationships • Positive thinking • Grit and determination • Effective communication • Empathy building	• Goal setting • Motivation and willpower • Positive social media use • Tackling social barriers • Values, culture and beliefs • Achieving your dreams • Leadership & teamwork

Mentors are selected on the similarity of their background to those of the students they work with, aligning aspects such as familial problems, unemployment, poor engagement/attainment at school and low social capital.

Objectives

There were two objectives for this study:

1. Identify the learning, behavioural changes and development of career aspirations that took place.
2. Identify the aspects of the programme responsible and the extent to which Law's Community-Interaction Theory could account for the outcomes and mechanisms.

Methodology

The epistemological basis for this research was social constructivism. Initial access to the students and mentor was negotiated via the local team where we met one mentor and the groups she was working with before and after the mentoring programme was delivered. A second wave of data collection with a different mentor was conducted at a later date (in the same school). The small sample size did not permit reliable quantitative data analysis – given this, and the fact that a key priority of the analysis was to identify how and why the programme resulted in particular outcomes, we opted to adopt a qualitative paradigm, probing of the perceptions, experiences and reflections captured from the participants and the programme deliverer (Crockford *et al.*, 2018).

The study used Epstein's (2002) second approach to qualitative longitudinal research (periodic studies at regular or irregular intervals). The first period provided a baseline measure of the students' thoughts and feelings about school, learning, progression and their career aspirations. The second period of data collection explicitly tapped into their thoughts regarding the programme. Using two data collection points, before the programme and after the programme, permitted the establishment of a 'baseline' of career and progression knowledge and aspirations, and the identification of changes over time.

Participants

Fifty Year Nine (aged 13–14) students from two schools in England took part in the mentoring. There was significant variation in their backgrounds, but they all demonstrated unmet potential, a lack of confidence and/or emotional and behavioural issues in class. There was an even split of males and females in the study. The group mentors also participated in the study.

Procedure and methods

The students were split into separate groups for mentoring. Focus groups that included the mentor were chosen as a method for data collection as opposed to individual interviews partly due to time/practical constraints (the students were not able to be released from class individually for interviews) and partly because it was important to understand how students experienced the programme within their groups. In particular, it was important to see how the students and mentors interacted to explore whether there was evidence of the direct influences described by Law (role modelling, feedback, support, expectations and information). A semi-structured interview process was adopted in each focus group to allow for the standardisation of the primary line of questioning across the groups, but which also offered flexibility for follow-up questions and additional lines of enquiry. In the last week of the mentoring programme the research team again talked with the mentor and the mentoring groups.

Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to analysis was adopted, offering a rigorous approach to interrogating qualitative data. Data from the first focus group provided a baseline of the students' career aspirations, while data from the second set of focus groups offered a glimpse into the distance travelled by the two groups of students. Table 3 describes the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis and what the research team did at each step.

Table 3: Braun and Clarke's six-point framework

Step	**Definitions by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87-89)**	**Our application**
1. Familiarise yourself with the data	'Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas'	The data was transcribed and each member of the research team read the transcripts with two things in mind: 1.

		participant outcomes (reactions, learning, behaviour changes), and 2. the indirect and direct influences described in community action theory in mind.
2. Generate initial codes	'Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code' 'In deductive thematic analysis, you might approach the data with specific questions in mind that you wish to code around'	Initial coding followed a deductive approach with searches for baseline status, emergence of participant outcomes (reactions, learning, behaviour change) and the five direct, and two indirect, influences described by Law. Secondary coding adopted a more inductive approach where transcripts were read and coded without Law's theoretical lens in mind.
3. Searching for themes	'Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme'	Codes were first collated under 'super' themes: outcomes, indirect processes, direct processes. Super themes were then delineated.

		Participant outcome themes were identified as reactions, learning or behaviour change. Indirect processes were identified as being 'transmitters of motivation' or 'modifier of social function'. Direct processes were identified as role modelling, feedback, information, support or expectations.
4. Reviewing themes	'Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis'	Themes were reviewed to ascertain if there was sufficient frequency, salience and consistency of codes to justify them.
5. Defining and naming themes	'Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme'	Themes were refined further ensuring that their names reflected their content as well as their relation to participant outcomes and/or community interaction processes.
6. Producing the report	'The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research question and literature,	Quotes were extracted from the transcripts to illustrate the themes and furnish the narrative.

	producing a scholarly report of the analysis'	

Findings

This section begins with providing an analysis of the students in the initial focus group, focusing on their knowledge and understanding of self, careers, progression routes and their own aspirations in order to be able to identify distance travelled in the second focus group. The codes we derived are presented in Table 4, which also includes aspects of the programme which were critical to bringing about outcomes. Quotes are attributed by gender (F or M) and by the number the participant was given.

Table 4: Codes and themes

Codes	**Themes**
'Baseline' status	• Uncertainty and under-confidence
Participant outcomes	• Learning • Behaviour
Direct influences	• Support and trust • Expectations • Feedback • Role modelling
Indirect influences	• Transmission of motivation (behaviour change) • Modifier of social functioning (learning)

Theme 1: Uncertainty and under confidence

At baseline, the students' current circumstances were described with negativity and their futures were characterised with uncertainty and low expectations.

> 'I'm not able to motivate myself in school.' (M03)
>
> 'When I think about the future, I feel scared. I don't think I'll pass my GCSE's.[ii] ' (F06)
>
> 'I don't think college, university and a dream job are likely.' (F11)

Uncertainty was highly prevalent and salient, with half of the students unable to verbalise any aspirations. Aspirations which were verbalised were varied. A small minority (n=8) articulated grounded and potentially realistic aspirations – social worker and

lawyer – while others (n=17) shared aspirations such as footballer and F1 pit crew. While these aspirations are not necessarily unrealistic, they are highly idealised. These students were not able to describe the routes they would need to take to enter these careers.

> 'Not thinking about A levels, too far.'[iii] (M21)

Only five students described concrete plans or had formed goals with possible routes. The students with unrealistic career aspirations may have still been rooted in what Super (1980) has referred to as the fantasy stage. Without a range of different sources to construct images of themselves in different careers and develop aspirations, young people may rely on the media they attend to as sources, but this does not necessarily provide information on how to achieve these goals, leaving the young person feeling anxious:

> 'When I think about the future I feel worried... I don't exactly know if I'm going to do everything that I want to do.' (M13)

Theme 2: Learning and modifying of social functioning

The three over-arching pillars of the programme were to tackle challenging behaviour, create a positive mindset and raise aspirations. Students evidenced learning in each of these three pillars. From the first pillar (tackling challenging behaviour) they had learned about their behaviour – the negative consequences of it, why it happened and how to behave differently. Specifically, they learned how to control their behaviour, how to control outbursts and how to de-escalate challenging situations. There was an increased understanding of how to use their past to learn from their mistakes and the importance of behaving in a more positive way.

> 'It’s important to make mistakes so you can learn from them.' (F03)

> 'Sometimes you want to do the wrong thing but it’s better to do what you NEED to do.' (M08)

Further learning about determining their own outcomes was evidenced in their discussions of increased resilience, self-belief and self-confidence, indicating that the second pillar of ‘creating a positive mindset’ had also realised positive impacts:

> 'The only person who can stop you from doing what you want to do is yourself.' (M08)

> 'I believe in myself a lot more now. I think about what I am going to do before I do it.' (M10)

The third pillar of the programme – raising aspirations – also evidenced learning. Discussion of future options and career aspirations was significantly more prevalent and salient than in the first focus group. More than half of the students (36) articulated some form of career aspiration in the second focus groups, supporting the findings by Jordan, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2016). There were clear indications that awareness of opportunities had increased, particularly about what further education[iv] and higher education[v] entail. While there was still a lack of clarity or detail in some of the aspirations articulated, students had begun to explore different options and recognised their own values, interests and abilities. There was a realisation that a range of aspirations could be possible, regardless of what their home life or background was (an aspect of the third pillar termed 'tackling social barriers'). This was linked to the learning they had taken from the second pillar (creating a positive mindset) concerning increased resilience, determination and increased self-esteem.

> 'At first I wanted to be a police officer but then I just thought no, because I don't like fights, so I want to be a lawyer and I didn't think about college or university and stuff like that, I didn't even think about how long I'd have to be at university for. But I know now, and I think it will be hard but that I can...at least try.' (F19)

> 'We've got more opportunities than I thought we did. For different subjects there are quite a lot of different jobs you can do. Or you could be an entrepreneur! There is a lot more to do at college than I knew. I always thought it was just like school but there's a lot more to do with jobs so it can help with choices after that.' (M05)

This final quote illustrates the first indirect process described by Law – community serving as a modifier of social functioning. The new community the students found themselves in operated with a new set of norms. This included positivity towards the self (self-belief, self-confidence and resilience) and towards achieving future goals. These new community norms were able to modify

existing beliefs the students held about the prospects and the careers children from their backgrounds should have. This demonstrates the positive impact community interaction can have on young people (e.g. Law, 1981). The mentoring group challenged beliefs about intellectual ability and about personal effectiveness.

In the second focus group, more students articulated concrete career aspirations (n=26) than in the first focus group (n=8). Those who articulated these concrete career aspirations were more likely to have clearer goals and plans in place; for example, one student described a specific college and university they wished to attend. These specific destinations in their plans had come about from interacting in different communities, which increased the sources of images they received; for example, they had been to visit a further education college and a higher education institute.

Theme 3: Behaviour change and transmission of motivation

Students evidenced that what they had learned in the mentoring sessions had translated into altered behaviour – this was less prevalent than evidence of learning but just as salient. For several of the male students (n=11), a key change was being able to manage their emotions and adopt more positive responses in challenging situations.

> 'Something happened today, and this lad started to try and fight me. He started to swing for me… he did hit me… and I didn't fight back because I knew that would be the wrong decision. It would have got me into trouble. So, I just pushed him away.' (M14)

During the second focus group, a salient finding was that students' thoughts and feelings about education had become more positive (this was noted 24 times across the second set of focus groups). The students had begun to appreciate the value of education and expressed increased motivation to work harder. They talked about how they had become more likely to attend school, to engage in class and behave appropriately in school. This behaviour change illustrates the second of Law's (1981) indirect influences within CIT – transmission of motivation.

> 'I want to get my head down more now because I know what the future holds. If you can focus, then there's quite a lot you could be doing but if you don't get the grades you could end up doing anything or something that could lead you into something bad. Or being unemployed.' (M14)

> 'School has changed. My behaviour is better. I come to school more often and I go to more lessons now.'(M24)

Theme 4: Expectations

In contrast to their dialogues in the first focus group, students in the second focus groups demonstrated that some expectations had been communicated to the students by the mentor. However, this was the least prevalent and salient theme and emerged primarily from the mentors. Here mentors set an expectation, described how students were already working towards it and then affirmed their belief in the student's ability to meet those expectations.

> 'See, so much good stuff, and it's exactly like you, so all you've got to do is believe in yourself. Literally, you just tell yourself that you can and you'll be able to do it, and that's the exact same thing that you've done today, and that you will do.' (Mentor 1 talking to students)

> 'We've got more opportunities than I realised. I didn't really think about what I wanted to do before but now I know that I need to think about what I want to do. I can't just leave it until the last minute and do whatever comes my way, I can work out what I want to do and it doesn't matter where I come from.' (F19)

It is interesting that again, these positive expectations are not being expressed by teachers or family, rather they have come from learning taking place within the group mentoring sessions and are being affirmed by the mentor. Reid's (2020) findings suggested a need for student's career narratives to be storyboarded so that guidance professionals could better understand the range of expectations students have placed on them so as to enable them to support the student in challenging 'unhelpful or negative self-limiting beliefs' (Reid, 2020, p. 54). In the present study, with these younger students, it was also important that negative and limiting self-beliefs were challenged and the group mentoring offered the opportunity for this to take place. The focus here, however, was less on choosing an 'elite'

career such as medicine, and more on developing the understanding that your background does not have to dictate your future options.

Theme 5: Trust and support

This was observed frequently across the second focus groups. Trust and support seemed to be intertwined with each other. Both were key components in the environment created by the mentor for the students to be able to engage. Students indicated that the trust stemmed from the safe, non-judgemental environment the sessions took place in (the word 'safe' was mentioned 23 times).

> 'She makes me feel better, there's trust around her, I feel safe around her. If I need help or anything, or I am struggling, there's someone here to help me.' (F06)
>
> 'You can just be yourself and no-one judges you in here.' (M08)

The mentor selected her language carefully to ensure a positive rather than a negative discourse. She drew attention back to the progress students had made, rather than focus on mistakes, which was in direct contrast to how the students had described their teachers in the first focus groups. Teachers withheld praise and were perceived as critical and unhelpful. In the mentoring, the mentees feelings of acceptance and support may have been an important route to being able to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. This step may be necessary for the removal of limiting self-beliefs. Reid (2020) found that the position of the individual providing support was important in determining the credibility of that support; those with relevant experiences were perceived as offering the most relevant support. This also occurred in the present study. The mentors were trusted and respected not just because of how they communicated with the students but also because their backgrounds were similar. As Reid notes, these findings make it clear that young people from widening participation backgrounds need to be exposed to individuals they will perceive as credible sources of support.

Theme 6: Role modelling

Role modelling was a highly salient and prevalent theme in the data. The mentor role modelled appropriate behaviour and made extensive use of examples from their own personal pathways to success to illustrate appropriate courses of action to the students. The mentors were able to help the students understand they were not alone in the emotions, personal circumstances and life challenges they faced, and crucially the mentors were able to demonstrate strategies for overcoming such challenges. This clearly resonated with the students who perceived their mentors as a valuable source of guidance.

> 'I'm going to be honest, when I'm under stress or pressure, I just think about what I'm going at, believe in myself, and I can do it. I was really worried about today, I'm going to be honest, but when you've got people around you and they're telling you everything is going to be alright and you believe in yourself, it turns out pretty fine. The first time I met you guys I didn't think you'd like me straight away, I didn't think you'd connect to me, and you guys said I'm an amazing person so why wouldn't I believe that? ' (Mentor 1 speaking to her students)

> 'I think they [the students] like that I am from round here, that my family has been really difficult and that it took me lots of tries to get where I am. When I tell them how I have managed to achieve things it makes sense to them.' (Mentor 2)

> 'She talks about things that will actually happen, that would happen to you and that, she can tell a story about your life which could happen to us, which then prevents it happening.' (F07)

The students recognised that the mentors' previous experiences could be used as learning points to alter their own behaviour. There was a clear impact of role modelling on the students' personal effectiveness and their behaviour in school. Role modelling had led to the recognition of education being an important step in their career journeys. This gave them the confidence to explore career aspirations and although some students had more concrete aspirations than others, there was an overall increase in the development of aspirations and plans.

Theme 7: Feedback

This theme typically emerged in the dialogues between the mentors and the students. One mentor reminded and encouraged students to talk about the behavioural changes and career aspirations that had developed during the programme so she could strengthen and reiterate previous feedback and remind them of the progress they had made. For example, in this first dialogue between one mentor and her students, she starts by acknowledging that talking about their own developments and aspirations can be a 'scary' thing to do:

> 'I know it might be scary saying some honest stuff about ourselves, but it would be really good if you could say them things out loud.' (Mentor 1)

The students were still reluctant to talk about their own developments, so the mentor reiterated previous feedback she had offered:

> **Mentor**: 'Think of one [development] that we've been speaking about for the past couple of weeks, think about the problem that you solved by signing that sheet.'
>
> **FM04**: 'Oh, my confidence.'
>
> **Mentor**: 'There you go.'
>
> This encouragement brought forth other previous discussions with other students:
>
> **Mentor: '**Think about one thing that you've learnt about yourself from being in these sessions. Think about the first time I met you, what did you say to me, who don't you like?'
>
> **M01: '**People.'
>
> **Mentor:** 'People, and what happened? Do you sit in a room full of people that you don't know, and you communicate with? Do you sit in this room and communicate like you are now, and talk out loud?'
>
> **M01:** 'Yeah.'

There was less evidence of feedback on career aspirations than on behavioural changes. Where there was feedback it was offered in response to possible plans for after Year 11 (when the

students turn 16 and can leave school) that students described, rather than career aspirations per se.

General discussion

The findings offer support for the efficacy of group mentoring, adding to those discussed by Jordan, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2016) and Dubois *et al.* (2011). It also provides support for the CIT (Law, 1981) in the context which it was designed for – young people and their career development. The specific objectives of the research were to:

1. Identify the learning, behavioural changes and development of career aspirations that took place.
2. Identify the aspects of the programme responsible and the extent to which Law's Community-Interaction Theory could account for the outcomes and mechanisms.

With respect to the first objective, students evidenced learning in each of the three pillars of the programme: tackling challenging behaviour, creating a positive mindset and raising aspirations. There was evidence that the students had learned what would, and would not, bring positive benefits for them. Additionally, there was evidence that this learning had been translated into behavioural change. Career aspirations saw development from the fantasy stage of career thinking (Super, 1980) to more concrete aspirations and knowledge of how to achieve these.

With respect to the second objective, the data suggested several mechanisms for these outcomes. Perhaps the most important mechanism (because it facilitated later mechanisms) was the capacity of the mentors to create an environment for learning that was psychologically safe. This is an environment where there is the belief that there is no punishment or humiliation for contributing ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes (Cole, 2019). The mentors provided a psychologically safe, supportive community that facilitated trust and openness. With this in place, the mentors were credible role models who could set expectations and provide feedback; an extended community that these young people could refer to for guidance and support. Expectations, feedback, support and modelling were

transmitted through community interaction, demonstrating the different modes through which this can happen (Law, 2009).

Community as a modifier of social functioning was demonstrated as students in this new community operated with a new set of norms. These norms included positivity regarding the self (self-belief, self-confidence and resilience) and the development of concrete possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). These new community norms were able to modify existing beliefs the students held about the careers (or possible selves) children from their backgrounds should have. This demonstrates the positive impact community interaction can have on young people (e.g. Law, 1981) by extending the community they can refer to. The mentoring group challenged beliefs about intellectual ability and about personal effectiveness.

There was also evidence of transmission of motivation. Students disclosed several examples of how they were motivated to behave differently in school and how they were motivated to think differently about their futures. Law (2009) writes:

> '….knowing'-things-differently alters the course of events. Changed thought changes action…..The more varied the people you encounter, the more choice you will have about what to think. Change comes from encountering and exchanging with new people…' (Law, 2009, pp. 28).

Taking these students out of their existing enclaves (social settings which make up society but are qualitatively and quantitatively different from each other; Douglas, 2002) and offering them access to a new extended community provided students with more choice of how to think about their current and possible selves, giving them a wider frame of reference. The group mentoring manifested a fundamental aspect of community interaction thinking:

> 'community-interaction thinking argues that we must start from where people are, drawing on the local dynamics that already drive their lives. And we can do that by broadening horizons and enriching experience – other people to talk to, new things to do, different places to go'. (Law, 2009, pp. 6.)

The mentors were able to get students talking about their current lives and possible selves and then broaden those horizons and develop their possible selves by sharing their own experiences. This new extended community became a place that

they could refer to for safety, guidance, reassurance, feedback and self-development.

In his 2009 writings, Law discusses the massive increase in access to new communities through the internet and social media. He points out that these may not be horizon- or mind-broadening as they are too often used to seek out others who are similar to ourselves. They then confirm our own thinking and biases. The findings here suggest that virtual communities for young people, without a mentor who offers psychological safety and different community norms, will not be able to exploit community interactions to facilitate career development.

While the data can be interpreted as supportive for CIT in this context, it is important to be mindful of alternative explanations. The well-documented phenomena observed in groups (groupthink [Janis, 2008] as discussed earlier) could conceivably account for the findings here. However, it is argued that there is not actually sufficient evidence in the data to conclude Groupthink was at play. Indicators (see Table 1) – including stereotyping, censorship and peer pressure – were not observed; the mentors worked to create a psychologically safe environment (one without judgement when ideas, feelings or experiences are shared). This meant opinions were valid regardless of their slant and peers did not attempt to coerce, at least not in the focus groups which took place. The data suggested that discussion within the group had a high degree of openness, reducing the likelihood of rationalisation occurring. The content covered in the mentoring included identifying risky situations and learning how to think about the consequences of behaviour, which in itself should protect against invulnerability. The lack of evidence for the remaining indicators (mindguards, illusion of unanimity, complacency) does not of course mean that they did not exist, but given that the nature of the group was to create a community to facilitate learning rather than to make decisions, it seems unlikely that they would evolve.

In summary, viewing the group mentoring through the lens of CIT has identified four elements at play: motivation; interaction; increased range of communities; and modes of community influence (expectations, feedback, support, modelling and information). These were used to facilitate learning about self,

opportunities, decisions and transitions in a new, extended community which students can learn in. Alternative causal mechanisms such as groupthink cannot be completely ruled out but are less well evidenced in the present study.

Implications for practice

In practical terms, these findings suggest that in widening participation, it is important to first tackle underlying beliefs about the self. Harrison and Waller (2018) have argued that effective widening participation interventions should focus on developing attainment and expectations; these are what permit initial deconstruction of structural barriers. Educational outcomes at 16 years old are consistently associated with progression to HE (Chowdry *et al.*, 2013; Crawford, 2014; Harrison and Waller, 2018). In the present context, to create a platform for the students to improve educational outcomes and expectations, the mentors first tackled students' low self-confidence and esteem. When students felt more confident and capable, they were able to accept that students from their backgrounds have opportunities, and they became more motivated and modified their behaviour. The capacity to engage at school emerged as they came to understand the value of education and they enacted the behaviour needed to manage emotions, relationships and conflict.

In delivering these programmes it seems that what is delivered is as important as who delivers it and indeed how it is delivered – just as Law has posited throughout CIT. In considering the 'what', this programme contained several aspects of widening participation programmes shown to be related to positive outcomes. Authors such as Baines, Gooch and Ng-Knight (2022), Burgess, Horton and Moores (2021), and Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) note that multiple touch points are important: starting early in the student life cycle, building tangible skills and exposure to role models. The present programme manifested all of these.

The findings here indicate the 'how' of effective programmes requires that the deliverer can provide an extended community that is supportive, offers feedback on successes and strengths, and offers strategies for participant development. A focus on progress and future development, as opposed to highlighting

mistakes and weaknesses, encourages development of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

In terms of the 'who', the deliverer needs to be able to refer to experiences that the student can identify with. This affords the deliverer credibility so that when life examples of coping mechanisms, problem-solving or behavioural strategies are shared, they are perceived as legitimate and plausible, as was found in Reid's (2020) study. Finally, the deliverer can mediate, or moderate, the effect of other social groups on students' aspirations by challenging preconceptions (with reference to self or others in the group) and by creating new community norms and expectations.

Limitations

The primary limitation was the focus on only two mentors and their students. The mentors are typically selected on the basis that they have overcome some life challenges to become successful and that their backgrounds are similar to the students they are mentoring. Although this was evident in the groups we studied, other groups may experience different processes and outcomes. Ideally, long-term changes in attainment and destinations after the age of 16 should also be monitored to identify any lasting impact on the participants; this is a limitation found across the widening participation literature (e.g. Baines, Gooch and Ng-Knight, 2022; and Burgess, Horton and Moores, 2021).

Conclusion

Group mentoring can be effective in helping young people understand themselves, manage their emotions and regulate behaviour. This allows them to develop their confidence, engage more effectively with their education and begin to develop career-related aspirations. This approach is effective in part because it utilises effective intervention design (e.g. multiple touch points, begins early in student life cycle and uses role models to build skills), but also because it offers young people the opportunity to increase the range of adults they interact with. That is to say, it creates an extended community for them to refer to. It moves them out of existing enclaves and creates extended communities who transmit support, expectations and feedback, and provide

credible role models. Being part of an extended community challenges existing beliefs; these can be modified as can student motivation to work towards these embryonic aspirations. Law's Community-Interaction Theory can account for the short-term outcomes these young people experienced from engaging with a group mentoring programme. Future research should utilise larger sample sizes and explore longer-term outcomes, exploring the extent to which articulated pathways and embryonic career aspirations are realised.

[i] The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (now called UniConnect) is funded by The Office for Students and brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college

[ii] The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification typically achieved over Years 10 and 11 in a particular subject, taken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

[iii] A Levels are a qualification typically undertaken in a sixth form at a school or college when students are aged 16 or older. They are typically undertaken by students taking a more academic progression route.

[iv] Education below degree level for people above school age

[v] *Tertiary education leading to the award of an academic degree*

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