

‘IT’S A SIXTH SENSE...I SEE YOU, YOU SEE ME, AND WE’VE BEEN THERE’: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPING A PEER MENTORING SCHEME WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the development of peer mentorship within Youth Justice, including the value and utilisation of lived experience. Children and young people who have acquired specific experience of system contact can accrue experiential knowledge and become ‘experts by experience’. These children and young people are potentially capable of providing unique insights, which include sharing knowledge and experiences of navigating welfare and justice services. This research paper provides in-depth insight from an ongoing study about the experiences of those involved in delivering a peer mentoring scheme within a youth justice context. Data from semi-structured interviews with lived experienced peer mentors and practitioners were analysed using thematic analysis to explore participants' opinions, attitudes and beliefs regarding the design and development of a peer mentoring scheme. The article contributes to a conceptual understanding of the design and delivery of peer mentorship within youth justice.

Keywords

Peer mentoring; lived experience; participation; young people; youth justice; qualitative research

Introduction

This article draws upon the perspectives of peer mentors and practitioners involved in a peer mentoring scheme. Research into the application of peer mentoring in youth justice across community settings is scarce, and the current study, therefore, seeks to provide important new insights into the potential value of lived experience within peer mentoring. Mentors who have acquired lived experiences of system contact and who have overcome hardship can nurture personal and educational growth in others (Myles, 2022). In describing the value of peer mentors for those who have been imprisoned, Lenkens (2020: 542) observed that: “[Peer mentors] *understand how certain situations and circumstances may lead adolescents to become involved in criminal behaviour, what it is like to be seen as a criminal, and that life after prison is difficult. This profound understanding of isolation, pain and rejection is considered different from that of formal care providers who have gained their knowledge through education.*” Hence, lived experience mentors, to a greater or lesser extent, understand the commitment it takes to overcome personal and social barriers associated with involvement in the criminal justice system. Moreover, shame and mistrust can prevent children and young people from developing positive relationships with peers and authority figures (Myles, 2023; Porteous and Goodman, 2023; Buck, 2020; Brierley, 2021). Therefore, it is important to understand how peer mentors can support children and young people to build trust and work through their shame or other negative experiences.

The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales alludes to the need to generate evidence on the use of lived experience, as part of a strengths-based approach, to help prevent reoffending (YJB, 2021). This project is, therefore, timely, as it aims to offer novel insights into how lived experience can be valued and utilised through peer mentoring practices in a youth justice context. The article will first review relevant literature on peer mentoring and the value of lived experience. It then describes the research process. The authors then proceed to present some preliminary findings and, in so doing, offer a critical discussion, capturing some of the benefits and challenges of developing a peer mentoring scheme with children and young people in youth justice.

Mentoring in youth justice

Mentoring can be described as a prosocial and role model-based approach to supporting children involved in both social care and criminal justice systems, characterised as a voluntary relationship between the mentor and mentee (Porteous, 2005). Whilst the focus of such partnerships can differ depending on the requirements and preferences of those involved, mentors tend to provide coaching and support, including necessary emotional and practical assistance to mentees (O'Connor and Waddell, 2015; Porteous, 2005; Stephenson et al., 2007; Bussu and Burton, 2022). Peer mentoring is a relatively recent development in the youth justice context and has the potential to reconcile experiences of disempowerment or trauma-inducing criminal justice system contact (Johns et al., 2023; Buck, 2020). Mentees can feel emotionally supported and have a sense of belonging when they are deeply understood by mentors and, therefore, potentially more motivated to (re)engage with services (Creaney, 2018). Mentors can relate through shared experiences and even act as a conduit to access other services and address systemic harms and inequalities (Johns et al., 2023; Smart, 2023; Atenas et al., 2023). Essentially, peer mentoring as a participatory practice promotes individual, relational and broader social outcomes that

can be useful within a youth justice context, especially in promoting desistance for justice involved children and young people who may be reluctant to engage with services and feel disempowered in their lives (Thompson, and Spacey, 2023).

Lenkens et al. (2023) investigated the extent to which peer support can facilitate processes of desistance. According to the authors, key features of the approach include empathy and acceptance, principles that can be applied through forging a non-judgmental relationship. These aspects were also considered effective mechanisms for facilitating desistance (Lenkens et al., 2023). Previous studies also offer insight into how prosocial mentor-mentee relationships can have a positive impact on levels of desistance and can prevent or at the very least reduce the likelihood of involvement in antisocial behaviours (Gunay and Bacon, 2020). Elsewhere, scholars affirm the effectiveness of peer mentoring and make reference to the benefits of a non-hierarchical mentor-mentee trusted relationship, which takes time to nurture, and requires demonstration of a flexible disposition amongst those involved (Creaney et al., 2024; Myles, 2023). Moreover, in youth justice services, peer mentors with lived experience may be able to break down some barriers related to power inequalities between professionals and children by adopting and embracing a relational practice which supports meaningful engagement (Myles, 2022; Creaney, 2018). Subsequently, peer mentoring can be a practice that supports the Child First paradigm within the current youth justice system in England and Wales by adhering to the principle of meaningful collaboration with children (Burns and Creaney, 2023). Peer mentors can ultimately capitalise on their lived experience to support other children in similar situations, contributing to positive social outcomes.

Lived experience and peer mentoring

Children and young people, who have experienced adversities and contact with care and/or the justice system, can accrue experiential knowledge (wisdom or 'know-how') acquired through first-hand or lived experiences of contact with the criminal justice system (Borkman, 1976: 4). Therefore, they can become an 'expert by experience' (CYCJ, 2021; Creaney, 2018), which is a valuable resource for peer mentoring. Myles (2023) describes this valuable resource as skills accumulated to navigate the justice system, demonstrating recovery from traumatic experiences (such as being in custody as a child), but making it through the other side. This specific form of expertise provides high levels of compassion and empathy that can create a sense of hope and inspiration for mentees (Creaney, 2018). Lived experience mentors can understand the pain and commitment it takes to overcome the personal and social barriers associated with change, as they have been able to navigate demands from system contact and can share unique insights (Creaney et al., 2024; Creaney, 2018; Peer Power, 2018).

Whilst there are benefits of peer support and mentorship schemes within the youth justice context, there are also potential challenges and limitations associated with such practices. For example, there is a risk that some mentors may not always model appropriate behaviours with clear boundaries if they have unresolved trauma and are not adequately supervised and supported (Creaney, 2018). In this regard, it is relevant to plan structured mentoring training and supervision to promote the well-being of mentors and mentees within the Justice System (Buck, 2021; Brierley, 2023). The current study aims to build on these insights, extending conceptual perspectives and scholarship around the value of lived

experience peer mentoring for children involved in youth justice. The purpose of this study is to explore the benefits and challenges of a peer mentoring programme, including identification of the barriers that can impede relationship building. It also aims to explore young people's ability to be actively involved as partners in mentor-mentee relationships. It examines the implications of sharing lived experiences of the criminal justice system with other children. The next section of this paper discusses the research methodology, and following this, presents the findings and discussion.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the benefits and challenges of a peer mentoring programme, including identification of the barriers that can impede relationship building. The research team were involved in the early stages of project planning and recruitment of peer mentors. Two members of the research team were in regular contact with one staff member leading the project, to learn about the process of developing this type of programme within a youth justice setting. Several practitioners were also involved in developing the mentoring service. These included representatives from children's social care, police, residential care home managers, probation, and healthcare.

Once the project had been established, training was provided to peer mentors. At this point, it is important to note that the mentors were provided with a learning and development plan which included training around relationship-based practice, safeguarding processes and managing boundaries. The primary role of the peer mentor was to focus on developing a relationship with mentees. Mentors were encouraged by the mentor coordinator to use varied and interactive methods of engagement, such as going for a drive, getting some food or a milkshake, and engaging with their interests, including artwork, boxing, football, and other activities that can be accessed in the community.

The research team invited staff and peer mentors to be interviewed online via MS Teams, to share their perspectives and attitudes towards the ongoing project. The decision to employ semi-structured interviews with lived experienced peer mentors and practitioners was made to delve deeply into the nuanced perspectives, insights, and challenges encountered when facilitating peer mentor schemes with young people, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, successes, and areas for improvement within this context. This research method allows for open-ended explorative questioning, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions in their own words (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

The inability of researchers to travel to the peer-mentoring project location, meant that virtual interviews were most convenient for researchers. Interviews were held at a time convenient to the participant and conducted remotely over MS Teams. While it can be more challenging to observe body language virtually, interviewees may have been more comfortable within their own space (home environment) whilst participating (Keen et al., 2021; Oliffe et al., 2021). A purposive sampling technique was adopted to recruit participants (Clark, 2017). Five interviews were conducted with practitioners (e.g., police officers, residential and social workers, and advocates) and two interviews with peer mentors (young people aged over 18 with lived experience). The interviews involved a

reflective process for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of the project and the impact this has on practice and wider service processes.

It is vital that such research is conducted and disseminated so that other services may consider how this type of approach could improve outcomes for children and young people. Furthermore, the researchers are in the process of conducting additional interviews with professionals and new mentors who are subsequently engaged, to gather fresh data. Collecting data from the lived experiences of mentors, mentees, and practitioners and triangulating all data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017) is fundamental for understanding the processes and the operational dynamics of a mentoring scheme with children.

Reflexivity and data analysis

A reflexive practice is being utilised throughout this research project to determine the influence of the research team upon the interpretation of findings. This practice intends to overcome bias, validate subjectivities, and increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). All members of the research team have experience of working and researching within this area, with complementary and critical perspectives across the fields of criminology and psychology. While this could provide some insider bias, the experience of the research team offers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the setting in which they are conducting the research. Though roles are fluid, researchers maintained a large degree of 'outsiderness' since the organisation was independent of the research team's experience and relationships had to be forged in order to gain access (Stockdale, 2017). In maintaining reflexive approaches, the research team were able to discuss and challenge one another's interpretations of the data, which was inevitably interpreted through our own professional lenses and assumptions from specific fields of learning (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2021). All researchers maintained a commitment to uncovering how a researcher's presuppositions, prejudices and social world can influence ways of knowing. For example, reflections were made when attempting to interpret lived experiences of peer mentors and whether all lived experiences can be fully 'knowable' by the research team, since the research team has no specific experience of mentoring within the youth justice context. There was recognition that some participants may have experienced prior marginalisation. Thus, attention was focused on ensuring that they felt safe and comfortable to express perceptions and experiences (see Wilkinson et al., 2022).

The data analysis also involved a reflexive thematic approach to explore the participants' opinions and to elicit suggestions for supporting participants more effectively (Clarke and Braun, 2014). Thematic analysis is based on an approach to describe, understand, or interpret participants' experiences and to facilitate reflection on the various conceptual issues emerging. Members of the research team familiarised themselves with the data and began to identify dominant themes that emerged separately before meeting to discuss individual findings in a collaborative and reflective approach (Byrne, 2022). As we hope to continue researching this area, it is anticipated that these findings will continue to evolve with the data. In ensuring the reliability of our findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2017), the research team carried out the coding and analysis independently and then compared their interpretations to assess the degree of agreement. There was continuous feedback from the research team throughout the coding process.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Social Science Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) at Edge Hill University. The research team explained the project to participants (mentors and practitioners) at the host organisation. A Participant Information Sheet was also provided to potential participants, and a consent form was given, prior to the interview, once a verbal agreement had been made to participate in the study. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout the whole project. Reiterating this information before and after the interviews formed part of the ongoing process of consent (Price, 2021).

The research team adopted the British Society of Criminology's (2015) Code of Ethics for researchers. This included minimising potential harm and distress. Researchers did not ask peer mentors about their prior lived experiences and backgrounds. If any peer mentors disclosed this during the interview, the research team would be respectful and not be intrusive with any follow up questions relating to this.

Prior experiences of trauma may be prevalent amongst this population, and the researchers signposted all participants to relevant counselling and support services should they feel they need to access them. Prior to the interviews, researchers agreed that if it seemed any participants were uncomfortable (observed through video calling), they would offer to pause/reschedule the interview and/or move onto other topics. Researchers assessed participant understanding through the interaction within the interview, allowing space to check participant understanding throughout (see Price, 2021). Based on experience as researchers, the team have observed that certain practices are particularly useful for conducting interviews, such as establishing rapport through active listening, posing generative questions about participants' personal experiences in their roles, maintaining confidentiality, and fostering a relaxed atmosphere to encourage open dialogue and facilitate rich data exchange during online qualitative interviews with peer mentors and professionals.

Findings and analysis

Two main themes emerged from the analysis, namely 'building trusted relationships through shared experiences' and 'perceived barriers to operationalising peer support'. These themes offer insight into some of the benefits and challenges of the mentoring programme. The first theme focuses upon the importance and benefits of trusting relationships between mentors and mentees, including reflections upon whether/how to disclose lived experiences. The second theme identifies and reflects upon the difficulties navigating barriers to partnership working.

Building trusted relationships through shared experiences

Relationship based practice is a key feature of effective peer support and mentorship. Peer mentors can offer support and guidance in a unique manner due to prioritising a non-hierarchical mentor-mentee relationship and building trust (Creaney, et al., 2024; Myles, 2023). This relationship is particularly supportive and beneficial in the context of youth

justice (Myles, 2023; Brierley, 2021; Creaney, 2018) as recognised by both peer mentors and professionals:

“A peer mentor is constant in their life so there is a really good relationship there that exists. On more than one occasion, I've heard the court comment on how the peer mentor is probably the most constant person in their life, which is really sad to hear, but also amazing in terms of what the peer mentors doing.” (Advocate)

Both peer mentors and practitioners felt that for these relationships to be meaningful or impactful, a commitment to building a reciprocal and trusting relationship between peer mentors and mentees was essential. Peer mentors reflected on the importance of their presence and a positive relationship through being genuinely interested in the mentee by actively listening to them:

“I think it is just to support young people, when they have social workers in and out of their lives, they don't have good relationships with people because they don't trust them because mostly they only really go round to see them if there is like a meeting and they have to just like get information so I think it is more about having someone you can talk to that's not just there to get information and stuff, and it's to have a positive relationship.” (Peer mentor 1)

“I think being warm, understanding and empathetic, very important to be non-judgemental, and not relay your own experiences into their particular personal experience and be there to hold them and give them space to explore and explain what they want to do.” (Peer mentor 2)

This demonstrates how peer mentors who project empathy and are non-judgemental can help mentees to overcome some of the shame and mistrust that they may feel by helping them to 'find encouragement to persist in the face of barriers' (both personal and professional) (Kirkwood, 2023:196) (see also Myles, 2023; Porteous and Goodman, 2023; Buck, 2020; Brierley, 2021).

Crucially, peer mentors described the importance of their own lived experience in the ability to develop empathy, which they explained as 'seeking to understand the situations or backgrounds of those children receiving support' (peer mentor 2). It was largely agreed by peer mentors that they believed mentees were more likely to trust them due to their shared system experiences:

“It's a sixth sense kind of thing like: I see you, you see me and we've been there.” (Peer mentor 2)

“Because you are building a relationship with someone that is in the same situation you were in. If you've got lived experience and you can relate to someone, they will probably trust you more and they know you are not just there to do what everyone else is doing... because you care, it means more, I

think." (Peer mentor 1)

Creaney (2018: 24) suggested that the mentor represents an important "medium for change", able to build a trusting, empathic and consistent relationship with children and professionals. Young people who have been through a particular system and navigated its processes can accrue knowledge which can be drawn upon. If children receive such guidance from a person who they see as a role model, this may increase motivation levels to engage alongside nurturing a sense of belonging and increasing self-esteem or self-determination (Creaney 2018; see also Creaney, et al., 2024). As the accounts from mentors indicate, young people who are system-experienced have a specific level of relatability with mentees.

As lived experience is valued as a form of expertise for the peer mentoring role, peer mentors can develop a professional identity and in doing so increase levels of self-confidence and experience a sense of achievement. During the early planning stages of the project, the lead professional on the project decided that peer mentors would be employed as paid workers. This shows that the organisation values them as professionals with knowledge and skills, potentially recognising them as valued partners and trusted colleagues (Myles, 2023). Other relevant professionals involved in the project also recognised the value of the role for mentors themselves:

"I think it is amazing. I have actually looked after a couple of our young peer mentors; we are really proud of how they are doing. I think it gives them a sense of achievement, a sense of belonging, a sense of pride really, I think it is about our young people seeing themselves as young professionals, this is a paid gig, that they have got something to give that we can't give." (Residential childcare officer)

"People are written off because they've previously offended, or they've previously been down a route. There are opportunities out there and there are some quite significant opportunities out there, [and this], I would suggest is one of them." (Community worker)

Professionals also highlighted the specific benefits of mentors being able to draw upon their lived experiences when supporting mentees. It was felt that peer mentors were more likely to be able to show empathy and connect with the child, working in partnership to achieve positive outcomes:

"You are just another adult, and until you are not just another adult you are always going to be another adult... You can empathise all you want but it is these people that are going to help, the mentor co-ordinators of this world that are spearheading it, fantastic!" (Residential childcare officer)

"Peer mentors have that lived experience, they know what it feels like to be on probation, they know what it feels like to be in custody, I don't, I have never been in custody, and I have never been on probation." (Probation

officer)

However, challenges highlighted by professionals included the difficulties navigating if/when to disclose lived experience, how to build and preserve boundaries and manage expectations (Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013), as alluded to by a practitioner:

“You know, for those kind of young people who have experienced trauma and, you know, damaged attachments and things like that, they've finally got this person who they can communicate with and if that person then goes, you know, no, you can't, you can't ring me at this time... You can't. I'm not doing this... like just being careful to manage those boundaries and you know. [...] umm, I can see that that must be the challenge.” (Advocate)

Sharing experiences can demonstrate to mentees that there is hope for the future and potential for positive change (Creaney, 2018). However, peer mentors have lived experiences of care and/or justice systems and have overcome hardships and may continue to experience trauma. There can be a delicate balance in maintaining one's well-being as a peer mentor, as the next section explores.

Mentors alluded to the importance of being reflective and self-aware, especially as they could 'spread themselves too thin sometimes' (peer mentor 2). Self-care was described by mentors as being of importance to prevent workplace stressors becoming unmanageable or harmful. To facilitate this process, access to regular and timely supervision was deemed crucial by mentors, especially in terms of skills development. Access to support for mentors was also highlighted as necessary, especially when they are supporting others who have experienced trauma or adversity.

“I don't think you would have got the job as a peer mentor if you haven't dealt with it [trauma] properly yet because you can't really support a young person if you can't support yourself.” (Peer mentor 1)

“I think it is really critical that you've invested your own healing through counselling and therapy and stuff like that. It is really important to be conscious of that before taking on a very sensitive role like this (peer mentor) ... (key skills include) developing maturity, having a bit of insight into your own stuff, being aware, having reflective practice is very key”. (Peer mentor 2)

Prior experiences or difficulties with attachment can influence interactions, making it challenging to maximise engagement and sustain participation in an activity or assessment process. Supervision, support, and training opportunities for those undertaking mentoring roles and investment in effective supervision are key to help maintain good levels of health and emotional wellbeing and to reduce the chances of personal and professional exhaustion.

Perceived barriers to operationalising peer support

As alluded to, as 'experts by experience' peer mentors have in-depth understanding of the justice system and may feel they have important truths to share with powerholders on ways of improving outcomes or enacting systems change. It can be difficult to overcome barriers to partnership building when peer mentors do not feel valued within the service. Nevertheless, it is important that practitioners treat them as equals by valuing their lived experiences (Creaney and Burns, 2023). It is necessary to create or nurture a culture within organisational spaces that fosters democratic processes, through access to positive office cultures. Mentors must feel valued within the workplace, their identity as professionals validated amongst the workforce and a clear commitment from other staff that they will help them to transition into this environment, in order to experience and maintain a sense of belonging. However, some peer mentors perceived a struggle to gain full acceptance:

"I think just being open to discussion and communicating effectively, that creates a good strong line of support... for me it is very strange going into some of these training sessions, being in a room with people that was involved in my journey. And I haven't seen these people for a very long time. There are elements where my self-esteem does drop. And that was one of those moments where I felt slightly uncomfortable, but I felt reassured in a sense because I was able to communicate with my manager and she was able to reassure me and there were other people around me that said, 'you are part of this team now and you are a fantastic person'. And they were helping to lift me up to help me feel like I am capable. I know I am capable it just feels strange being on the other side of it. I never thought that I would be there." (Peer mentor 2)

"On a professional level, it might be a bit tricky for other professionals who that are thinking these peer mentors are coming in, they might have their own personal feelings towards it, that we don't have educational years and years of getting degrees and those sorts of things. There might be challenges in the way of acceptance of new peer mentors coming in." (Peer mentor 2)

When professionals had worked with the peer mentors as users of youth services themselves, this impacted upon their own 'prejudices' (residential worker), including investment in the peer mentoring system, alongside perceptions regarding their capacity to change:

"... some of the staff have looked after these young people when what they would perceive as their worst, and they then can't get past that, because they still see that young person who is breaking doors, smashing things, causing trouble and I think it is about seeing that person as someone who is growing, they are not that little kid you looked after six years ago...some staff have been here for a long time, I know one staff member has looked after three generations of the same family." (Residential childcare officer)

“I know the mentor because I was involved in the care of the mentor. I know that she's very new to the role I and so I did sort of speak to her, but I'm it's I'm I don't want to blur my role with her and my knowledge of her. So, for me, I feel that I almost need to go to her supervisor.” (Residential worker)

One residential worker felt that professionals needed colleagues to ‘buy-in’ and ‘actively promote’ peer mentoring. A residential childcare officer felt that a cultural change is needed within professional services to ‘change the mindset’ of professionals. Indeed, creating equal relationships or devolving power can be challenging, as Johns, et al., (2023:136), note: ‘*for powerholders, sharing power with those over whom they have previously exercised power risks ceding some of their own. Professionals may fear that valorising lived experience will diminish their expertise*’. Furthermore, a challenge identified related to risk management. One Probation Officer alluded to the necessity of managing risk when seeking to prevent offending by children and young people and was concerned that the peer mentors may lack tacit and technical knowledge around factors affecting offending and ways to identify and manage risk:

“The thing that does come up or has come up is the matter around risk. We have got to do risk assessments. One of them has felt that the mentor has not grasped the understanding of what we are assessing in terms of risk. So, they saw that this young lad was still at very high risk of reoffending, and they queried that, and said that surely, he is not very high risk anymore because he is doing x y and z and there were several conversations around their feeling that the risk should be lowered. So, there is a little bit from this other person, in terms of the peer mentors understanding of a risk assessment and the fact that we have a duty, well we all do really, a duty to safeguard the young person, safeguard the public from harm, we certainly have to do very thorough risk assessments on some very dangerous young people. It wasn't a criticism at all.” (Probation Officer)

Therefore, it is considered important that mentors are aware of techniques and measures necessary to manage potential harm a child/mentee may cause to others. Mentors must also be aware of the complexity of adversity/risk faced by the child/mentee.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

The focus of this paper was to explore the value and purpose of peer mentoring in youth justice. In the literature review section, key terms were defined and discussed, including (peer) mentoring, and lived experience in a youth justice context. As alluded to, mentoring, as an activity or approach, can be used in different criminal justice settings. It has been characterised as a voluntary relationship between a mentor and mentee. Whilst the focus of such partnerships can differ depending on the requirements and preferences of those involved, mentors tend to provide coaching and support, including necessary emotional and practical assistance to mentees (O'Connor and Waddell 2015; Porteous, 2005; Stephenson et al., 2007). This also involves capturing a child's own account of their experiences to prevent the mentee from feeling disempowered. This can be achieved through relationship-

building, projecting empathy and being responsive to a mentee's preferences or interests. Peer mentoring is a relatively recent development in the youth justice context and has potential to reconcile experiences of disempowerment or potentially address the consequences of trauma-inducing criminal justice system contact (Johns et al., 2023; Buck, 2020). Whilst mentors can help a person to alter their thought processes by instilling a sense of hope that change is possible, it may be difficult to achieve meaningful transformation to a person's life or situation if structural inequalities persist. These issues, that can be experienced by mentees, such as housing inequalities and unmet educative needs, are largely outside of their control (Kirkwood, 2023).

This paper has presented key insights from mentors and practitioners involved in a peer mentoring project. Themes drawn out from the findings included: relationship building and the value of lived experience, and perceived barriers to operationalising peer support. This paper has offered some insight into the extent to which peer mentoring can nurture pro-social identities and facilitate relationship building. Furthermore, it was found that mentors who have similar backgrounds and system experiences to mentees can be role models, capable of influencing others in positive ways through relationship-building, which can nurture behavioural and attitude change (Thompson, and Spacey, 2023; Plourde et al., 2017; Mantovani et al., 2020). Indeed, as Kirkwood (2023:196) notes, 'a mentor can model pro-social behaviour and ways of being that outline possible future selves for the mentee'.

At this point, it is worth considering how local organisations with expertise in supporting lived experience young people, can be involved in co-designing and delivering peer mentoring projects which can potentially make a big difference to the success of peer mentoring relationships. For instance, the lived experience charity *Youth Ink* work in partnership with a local youth justice service (Goodman and Porteous, 2022). They facilitate peer support opportunities, including a peer-led conversation hub (Burns and Creaney, 2023). As part of this multi-agency approach, there is a pathway to volunteering opportunities for justice experienced young people, where they can 'talk about their lives and experiences with others who have been or are going through the youth justice system' (Goodman and Porteous, 2022:3). The research reported within this paper indicates that mentors deemed as 'experts by experience' can utilise 'experiential knowledge' when supporting others. The mentor role enables them to connect and empathise with their peers, including sharing knowledge and experiences in a safe environment, contributing to positive outcomes. Furthermore, it has been argued that 'motivation develops in the dialectical relationship between mentees and mentors, as mentees desire to change their lives, but mentors crystallise this by providing the vision and means to turn this into a reality' (Kirkwood, 2023:196). However, within the current study, it was found that some practitioners identified potential challenges within the peer mentoring scheme, such as the difficulty mentors may experience identifying and managing risk. Nevertheless, the practitioners interviewed for this study mostly recognised and appreciated the value of lived experience, the potential for personal skills development and especially the important role peer mentors can play in helping to facilitate pathways to positive outcomes. How this can be valued in practice will be explored further as the research project continues.

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