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Mentoring into higher education: A useful addition to the landscape of widening access to higher education?

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ABSTRACT

Alan Milburn, the Chair of the Government's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission recently highlighted the role of education in progressing social mobility in Scotland; 'In my view it's a grave social injustice that only one in forty pupils from Scotland's most deprived households...got three As in their Highers in 2011, compared to one in ten across all income levels'. An analysis of the data on school leavers in Scotland also points towards a considerable inequality in access to higher education in particular. This paper reports on a research and development project that progressed the provision of intergenerational mentoring for young people from communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage. The findings affirm the role of research in such innovation and indicate that intergenerational mentoring offers a process, long awaited, through which young people can gain access to the different forms of social and cultural capital that are implicitly essential for progression into higher education.

INTRODUCTION

In a speech delivered at Springburn Academy in Glasgow Alan Milburn, the Chair of the Government's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCP) highlighted the role of education in delivering increased social mobility in

Scotland. Key to his argument were data that illustrated the extent of educational inequality: *'In my view it's a grave social injustice that only one in forty pupils from Scotland's most deprived households – 220 in the whole of the country - got three As in their Highers in 2011, compared to one in ten across all income levels'*. He progressed this argument to link education and access to the professions where once again there is evidence of considerable challenges: *'In 2004 for example, one-third of the most Senior Civil Servants in Scotland (Heads of Department) were privately educated, when fewer than 5% of Scottish children are educated privately. The story is similar for business leaders and judges...'*

Inconsistencies in the systematic collection and recording of data over the post war decades make accurate statements about the magnitude of this problem difficult. However the data that are available suggest that the problem is an enduring one. Drawing on a report by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of Universities in the UK, Bolton (2010) indicated that the enrolment in higher education of those from a manual employment background amounted to only 24.6% of the 1955-56 entry. The UCAS intake in 2001 indicates a broadly similar proportion (27%) of entrants to degree courses at university were from skilled manual, partly skilled or unskilled backgrounds (Bolton, 2010 p.4). More recently research in the UK has indicated that 44 per cent of young people from the richest 20 per cent of households acquired a degree in 2002, compared to only 10 per cent from the poorest 20 per cent of households (Blanden & Machin, 2008). This is exemplified in more detailed research into medical school admissions which shows that between 1956 and 2001 there was *'little systematic change in social class of UK medical students over half a century, with minimal variation in the dominance of those from professional or managerial occupational backgrounds or in the under-representation of those from partly skilled or unskilled backgrounds'* (BMA, 2009 quoting from McManus, 2004).

An analysis of the data on school leavers in Scotland shows a similar situation and points towards a considerable inequality in access to higher education in particular. The Skills Development Scotland (SDS) *School Leaver Destinations Initial - Follow up survey 2011/12* indicates that only 18% of school leavers from Scotland's deprived neighbourhoods (using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, SIMD) entered higher education as opposed to 63% of those from the least deprived neighbourhoods. In Glasgow, which contains almost half of Scotland's most deprived neighbourhoods, 17% of young people from the most deprived neighbourhoods progressed to higher education while 68% of those from the least deprived neighbourhoods made the transition. An accepted interpretation of this evidence is that while the overall expansion of higher education has increased the enrolment from all social classes, the social balance of higher education has remained relatively constant.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

In a broader analysis of the literature on the social class gap in educational achievement Perry & Francis (2010) indicate that policy inspired interventions have maintained an enduring focus on 'poverty of aspiration'. This has been informed by a range of research which has argued that policy which supports interventions to 'raise aspirations' is significantly flawed and, furthermore, re-

enforces a deficit model of young people and their families in which they are viewed as having intrinsically low aspirations for their future careers. Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick (2010) argue that low aspirations in young people are often associated with *'...low self esteem, lack of knowledge of educational and career routes and possibilities, a lack of motivation to succeed educationally and/or a family background that may not value education'* (p.79). Francis & Hey (2009) support this assertion arguing that such 'deficit discourses' in which the individual young person, their families and communities are perceived as the source of the problem serve to shift attention away from the social structures and institutions that *'...perpetuate economic inequality and contribute to low educational achievement and locate them within the individuals themselves'* (p.1).

In support of these assertions there is now evidence which suggests that young people who are subject to social disadvantage may not in fact hold low aspirations at all. In their study of 89 young people from London described as at risk of dropping out of education, Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick (2010) found that a substantial number of the young people held, at some part in the course of the study, aspirations to become professionals. The authors emphasised the ways in which these young people regularly adapted and tempered their aspirations which were *'...circumscribed according to their structural locations'*. A study by Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston (2011) of disadvantaged young people living in Nottingham, London and Glasgow found that young people do have aspirations to go on to university and to attain professional and managerial positions. Their research concluded that policy needed to pay greater attention to the barriers young people experience in realising their aspirations and, crucially, that this should be sensitive and adjusted to the issues facing young people at local community levels.

A further contribution to this literature has been made by the recently published findings of the Joseph Rowntree Education and Poverty programme. This directly questioned whether interventions focusing on children and young people's and their parents' 'attitudes, aspirations and behaviour' (AABs) could actually impact positively on the attainment gap. Within this programme of research Cummings *et al* (2012) sought to understand the impact of interventions targeting attitudinal change (conceptualised as aspirations, locus of control and valuing school) and attainment. Their findings recognised the role of these attitudes in work with children and young people but were sceptical that an explicit focus on them by interventions was capable of delivering any significant impact on attainment (Cummings *et al*, 2012, p.77). Within the same programme Gorard *et al* (2012) analysed 1827 research reports exploring the causal impact on educational outcomes of the AABs of young people and their parents. Their findings correlated with those of Cummings *et al* in claiming that there was not enough evidence to make casual connections between a range of interventions and improved educational outcomes.

In parallel with the analysis of 'AAB' based interventions, other research has indicated the importance of broader out of school factors in explaining educational attainment (Ball, 2010, Gorard, 2007). Wikeley *et al* (2007) argue that positive out of school educational experiences are crucial to children and

young people in terms of equipping them with the interpersonal skills and understanding necessary for effective working relationships with their teachers. In addition private tutoring and a range of extra-curricular activities which are accessible to middle class families can equip children and young people with a range of skills shown to have a significant impact on attainment (Ball, 2003). Archer *et al.* (2010) have claimed that powerful groups such as the middle-classes are more likely to experience a smooth transition between their own 'life-worlds' and the social institutions around them, whereas working-class pupils are more likely to experience disjuncture and alienation. This raises particular questions for pupils living in communities experiencing high socio-economic disadvantage in which access to educational opportunities and experiences out of school is more limited. Research also indicates that addressing low attainment in these areas requires additional intervention that, rather than being generic, is specific to the needs of local communities (Lupton & Kintrea, 2011).

What then does the research community suggest is useful? Unfortunately the evidence to support specific interventions is not yet particularly strong. Summarising the findings from the Joseph Rowntree Education and Poverty programme, Carter-Wall & Whitfield (2012) indicate that the quality of evidence available to support specific interventions and particularly those aimed at developing young people's AABs remains weak. They do however indicate that there is stronger evidence to support parent-based interventions. In terms of interventions focusing on extra curricular participation and mentoring, their recommendation is for more innovation and thorough evaluation '*...where the current evidence is promising but not yet compelling*' (p.11) in order for successful interventions to be scaled up (p.9). More recently Archer *et al* (2013) argue that education policy should now endorse '*...diversifying and informing aspirations (as opposed to 'raising' them)*'. Drawing from the ideas of Bourdieu, Archer *et al* (*ibid.*) identify family habitus and cultural capital as key to young people's futures. Their recommendations for education policy are focused on 'leveling the playing field' and include a more nuanced approach to careers information and advice in which disadvantaged young people are supported in their knowledge and understanding of different career routes. In addition they identify the need to strengthen the social and cultural capital of young people.

In summarising the research evidence there is a strong assertion that a focus on raising aspirations has had little impact. It is suggested that future policy needs to be more cognisant of the wider structural contexts in which young people live and plan their futures. Cummings *et al* (2012) assert that 'An alternative model to explore is a more ecological approach; i.e. the way embedded supportive relationships in normal practice may help to bring about raised expectations at school' (p.6). The following section will explore the potential for intergenerational mentoring as an intervention to support young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and for whom higher education should be a viable option.

MENTORING - A WAY FORWARD?

The research literature on mentoring is diverse, draws widely on studies from the US and spans youth, academic and workplace mentoring (Eby *et al*, 2010). The focus of this section is on research in the US that has explored educational and particularly school based mentoring programmes. These programmes, largely funded by the US Department of State, have been broadly targeted at those young people '*...with the greatest need, particularly those living in rural areas, high-crime areas, troubled home environments, or experiencing educational failure*'. Mentors in these programmes have varied widely and included peer mentors, older students and adults of different ages. Mentoring of young people has grown rapidly in the US over the past decade and it is estimated that '*...3,000,000 adults now have formal, one-to-one mentoring relationships with young people; an increase of 19% since 2002*' (MENTOR, 2006). The Big Brother Big Sisters (BBBS) programme has been a leading organisation in this development delivering both community based mentoring (largely delivered outside the school) and school based mentoring (delivered within school). Studies across this and other programmes have found different forms of mentoring (e.g. involving adults, young people, college students or senior pupils as mentors) to have modest effects in a range of outcomes such as levels of truancy, school-related misconduct and absenteeism, participants' perceived academic abilities and peer support (Rhodes *et al* 2005). However, a recent meta-analysis of 73 mentoring programmes in the US (DuBois *et al* 2011) supported the overall effectiveness of mentoring in improving outcomes for young people across the social, emotional, academic and behavioural domains. In addition the authors' analysis placed the effectiveness of mentoring alongside other forms of youth intervention. Typically these projects were founded on the engagement of adult volunteer mentors in a one to one mentoring relationship sustained for a minimum of one year (mentoring sustained beyond a year shows increased benefits for young people).

Mentoring, this research argues, not only improves outcomes for young people but may also arrest decline. Evaluations of the BBBS programme reflect these findings. Analysis by Herrera *et al.*, (2011) and Bernstein *et al.*, (2009) have indicated that overall the impact of mentoring has been beneficial and is worth developing. However concerns are raised about the sustained impact of the programme. A key message was the need for increasingly differentiated research to investigate the ways in which this model of mentoring could be further developed and improved.

Other research on mentoring has developed a more sociological stance in trying to understand its impact. In a broad study of mentoring, Abelev (2009) examined the experiences of 48 people who were first generation college students (the first to attend college in their families), half of whom had progressed to college and half who were established professionals. Aspects of the main findings are particular to the US; some participants were supported in their application to non-local higher performing schools, some received financial support from their mentors, or had personal educational plans drawn up by their mentors. Abelev though located the success of participants in the influence of their mentor:

...understanding of this milieu was fostered through an ambassador-like mentor from the middle class that both accessed the resources and, by doing so, indirectly and directly taught the respondent the necessary interactional pattern. The mentors' knowledge of the interactional style and how to access resources at critical institutions, and the expectation that the child was entitled to that resource, was important to the process of advancement for each respondent (p.135).

Abelev draws heavily on the Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* to help understand the experiences of participants, defining it as '...the norms, beliefs, speech patterns and interactional style that members of a group internalize and accept as doxa, or Truth, and then view as common sense, or the way things should be done' (p.135). He argues that one of the main areas in which the difference in habitus between socially advantaged and disadvantaged young people manifests itself is in their interaction with institutions. As a result of their habitus, socially disadvantaged young people inherit what is effectively an interactional deficit which complicates and frustrates their interaction with schools and other powerful educational institutions. Ultimately this restricts their opportunities and, '...as a result, children outside of the middle class do not gain access to important knowledge and resources necessary for maneuvering within the middle class' (p.134).

In summary, US based research (and the small amount of evidence from the UK) which analyses the efficacy of mentoring as a global intervention for young people experiencing different forms of disadvantage indicates a modest positive impact. As the research becomes more differentiated however, the evidence suggests that mentoring for young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in particular is likely to have a more significant impact than for other groups (Cummings *et al.*, 2012). Perhaps then it is sensible to concur with Gorard *et al* (2012) in calling for the funding of more exploratory work in this area – no doubt some projects will fail; but, depending on their efficacy and cost-effectiveness, others will potentially progress to substantial and perhaps national programmes of improvement (p.71). For high attaining young people in the UK who come from a background of social disadvantage, and who are constrained in their interactions with the structures and discourses of higher education, a model of mentoring based on Abelev's more sociological positioning appears to hold promise. It is to operationalising such a research and development project that this paper will now turn.

DEVELOPING A PILOT MENTORING PROGRAMME

The research team had a long established relationship with large secondary school (~1000 pupils) located in an area of high socio-economic disadvantage¹. The focus of this work had progressed from wider analysis of pupil engagement in learning (see Gillies *et al*, 2010) towards trying to understand the experiences of those pupils who were high attaining and considering applying to enter higher education. These pupils formed a consistent small group of 15-20 pupils within each new S5 year group. The research team conducted research with this group

¹ Initially facilitated by engagement in the SFC funded Applied Educational Research programme (AERS).

exploring their social networks. One striking finding of this research see (Wilson & Hunter, *forthcoming*) was the unfamiliarity the young people had with higher education and the lack of personal contacts that they could draw on to help them access knowledge about higher education, understand and prepare an application. For example when looking at the networks of family and friends of the 26 young people in the study group one young person had a parent who went to university and another one an uncle. On the basis of these findings and discussion with the school headteacher it was decided that a small pilot project providing adult mentors with professional expertise and experience of higher education may be beneficial.

The main aim of the project was to support and have a positive impact on those S5 and S6 pupils taking their highers and considering progressing to higher education. The mentoring programme was seen as a means to support their studies, help them to navigate the landscape of higher education, support them in the application process and to provide a platform for discussion of their opportunities rather than, potentially, defaulting to a position from which they did not fully consider higher education. The project was conceptualised as a research/development process that would involve data collection, the iterative interpretation and understanding of which would be used to shape the on-going development of the project. The following key research questions shaped the research/development dimension of the project:

- How is the project experienced by all participants?
- In what ways does it impact on their lives?
- If appropriate, what processes need to be developed to expand the project and how do these need to be shaped and improved?
- How can the overall impact of the project be assessed?

METHODOLOGY

The research and development design of the project aligned with the findings of DuBois *et al* (2011) and Durlak (2011) which draw from a range of studies in the US to affirm the need for mentoring projects to involve collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The action research nature of the project focused on informing the on-going development of the mentoring programme and on establishing and refining effective processes for its delivery.

Outline of the process

The selection of suitable mentors was crucial to the aims of the project and it was decided that a local university provided several potentially fertile avenues for mentor recruitment. A local university was engaged in the project and advertisements seeking mentors were distributed via email and posters to university alumni and those attending courses within a centre for lifelong learning. Prospective mentors who responded to these advertisements completed a one-page application form outlining their educational background, career background and experience of working with young people. All mentors were at or nearing retirement, had higher education qualifications and represented a range of different professions. Initially twelve mentors were selected from twenty-two applicants to mentor the highest achieving 5th or 6th

year students at the school from February 2011. In initial meetings they were introduced to school staff and received training on child protection issues. Participating mentees were those young people identified by the school as having the potential to gain 5+higher examinations and to be interested in applying for a place in higher education. The young people met with the research team and were invited to participate following a discussion of the aims and nature of the intended project. Mentors and mentees were matched through discussion between the research team, the headteacher and the school's sixth year head. This process drew largely on what mentors had indicated on their application forms as their particular subject/career areas and the subject/careers areas the young people had expressed initial interest in. Mentor and mentees met each other mostly on a weekly basis in one-to-one 40-60 minute sessions that took place in the school library.

Data collection

In order to inform the development of the project data collection was on-going throughout and involved different approaches. Firstly, mentors were asked to email reflective notes to a researcher after each of their mentoring sessions. The mentors were asked to describe their experiences of the sessions recounting how they felt the session had progressed and indicating any issues/difficulties arising. All mentors provided notes and these varied from several pages after each session to more short intermittent notes summarising meetings. In addition to this process each of the mentors were interviewed by a researcher on three occasions over the school year. These semi-structured, in depth interviews lasted on average between 40-60mins and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Mentees were also interviewed at three stages over the course of the project. The interviews sought to help the research team understand whether the mentoring fitted the mentees expectations, whether they perceived it as useful and if they felt there were any improvements that could be made. Mentees were also invited to produce a brief personal summary of their experience of the mentoring process.

In addition several mentors and mentees were also asked to consider whether their sessions could be audio recorded. This process was intended to give the research team an insight into the dynamics and nature of developing mentor/mentee relationship. Several mentoring sessions were recorded from two mentoring relationships, involving a retired civil engineer and a retired doctor, the subjects of the case studies below. Further data were gathered through focus groups held with mentors towards the end of the project. These were designed to enable mentors to meet with each other, share experiences and discuss further ways in which they could support their mentees. The mentees were also invited to respond to the project development and several focus groups were held with mentees during the course of the project. The interviews, field notes and recordings that were collected as part of the research have generated an extended narrative and genealogy for each of the mentoring relationships.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT

In the following section data are presented from three different sources. The first presents a case study of one of the mentoring relationships (drawn primarily from interviews with mentor/mentee and recordings of mentoring sessions), the second is a more mentor orientated account drawn from mentor notes/reflections and the third is a mentee reflection on their mentoring experience.

Mentoring relationships – a case study

Paul's original career plans were focused on leaving school and '*...going into some sort of business, perhaps running a well known franchise*'. However he entered S5 with very good standard grades and quickly realised that with further study a number of careers he previously had not considered were potentially within reach:

It's just since the exam results, I didn't realise I could do as well as I could so I didn't really expect to be able to go to university at first ... but now I do (extract from interview).

At this point Paul began to consider a range of careers. He talked about becoming an architect as well as studying dentistry, medicine and veterinary science. He was attracted to the glamour of medicine and joked about wearing a white coat. Thinking further about medicine he used an appointment with his GP to discuss what being a doctor was like and how to apply to university. Throughout this process Paul was unable to draw on knowledge or experience from his family or wider social circle no members of which had attended university. At this point Paul was introduced to his mentor who was a retired physician:

When I first met my mentor I didn't know what to think of her, I didn't know anything about her- other than she was a retired doctor. It was a new experience since I had never spoken to a doctor on a personal level before and I don't have any doctors or people who work in a medical field in my family. However she was friendly, talkative and a bit assertive and I think we both enjoyed each other's company (extract from interview).

Their initial discussions focused on mapping out and discussing the different careers that Paul was considering. As the year progressed Paul and his mentor worked through a number of different career options with his mentor discussing with him the advantages and disadvantages of different professions and the diversity of potential roles within them. Paul was also supported by his mentor's partner, (a retired statistician) who helped him with his higher maths. His mentor also introduced him to her neighbours who were a practising dentist and optometrist; she organised work experience for him with these professionals and he also went with her on a tour of the collections at the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. Paul subsequently became more attracted to dentistry and what he understood were more sociable hours and potentially less stressful working conditions than those offered by a career in medicine:

Mentor: Have you tried writing down for yourself a list of what you think are the advantages of going into medicine, or dentistry or veterinary medicine or what are the disadvantages?

Paul: Not really, I've kind of thought about it though, in my head, I think I'd rather do dentistry for the social hours than medicine because, well that's what I've been told anyway, the social hours for dentistry are much better.

Mentor: The hours for dentistry are better because on the whole, no one really offers much out of hours dentistry though people perhaps need it, they don't get it. But there are a whole lot of fields in medicine where you can do very sociable hours, it depends on what you want to do – you know what speciality you go into, there are lots and lots of specialities – if you're in a very acute medicine or surgery, if you did obstetrics, but you can do things like public health, and pathology and a whole range of specialities in medicine that don't involve anti-social hours... But if you're thinking of the hours it is important because some people run on adrenalin, they love 3 o'clock in the morning and off they go, that was never for me...

Paul: I doubt that's for me either (extract from mentoring session).

As Paul and his mentor began to work towards dentistry as a firm choice a number of issues appeared that were important to address. Primarily, Paul's mentor identified difficulties with his English and specifically the need for him to increase his reading, vocabulary and general expression both for achieving the necessary grade B or above in Higher English but also for his performance at interview. To address this, his mentor read his higher English course texts, had her friends read texts and provide commentaries for Paul and also worked with him on his coursework. Keen to develop his reading she encouraged him to read the broadsheet newspapers bringing him copies of the Herald, Observer and Guardian newspapers (which his local newsagent did not stock) and directing him to specific articles. Paul enjoyed meeting his mentor and flourished with the support she offered:

You get somebody different in that isn't a teacher. You can get to know them and they find out what your passion is and what you want to do and they'll do everything they can to help you... 'cause [mentor] read two novels for me just so that I could maybe improve my English skills and I thought that that was really good 'cause it made me more determined as I knew somebody was doing this for me. It really increased my confidence that I could do a critical essay and my marks started to go up... in an ideal world everybody should get a mentor...(extract from interview).

Further academic support was organised for Paul by his mentor in the form of ongoing Maths tuition from her partner that sat alongside their mentoring sessions. In addition to this effort Paul's mentor identified the need for him to prepare adequately for the UKCAT tests. Aware that other young people had the advantage of organised classes in school that offered tutoring and practice for the UKCAT she ordered copies of the test through the school library and organised timed practice sessions for Paul. Paul's mentor though was conscious that not just the highest academic grades were necessary for his successful entry to dentistry. His overall life experience appeared limited when it came to the prospect of preparing personal statements for UCAS application and preparing for potential course interviews:

In a high demand specialty he is going to have to have the grades but he is also going to have to have background noise...(extract from mentor interview).

In addition to facilitating work experience Paul's mentor encouraged him to access all the support available. Paul participated in the Reach programme² and attended university open days and summer schools. He also joined the St John Ambulance service. Paul's mentor recognized all these activities as essential to broaden the experience he could draw on before presenting himself in personal statements and for interview. Paul's mentor also became concerned about his diet. She was aware that he walked for forty-five minutes to school without taking any breakfast. She encouraged him to eat more healthily:

Diet: is improving in terms of fruit consumption-now - has special peeler for his Kiwi fruits! However he does not eat breakfast - does not feel like eating in the morning. We discussed that there is a major body of evidence about better concentration and mental agility in those who do eat breakfast. He has agreed to try to eat a banana and a cereal bar as he walks to school. Lunch menu of chips and a spicy 'Subway' not optimal, but suspect that will be difficult to remedy at this stage. Will revisit later (extract from mentor notes).

Paul accepted this advice and alluded to the benefits:

I think I had strawberries before my English exam and I did quite well in that exam, I don't think I would put it all down to the strawberries but my brain was working a wee bit better that morning [laughing] (extract from interview).

The breadth of effort from Paul's mentor was extensive but she had a firm belief that Paul needed support in a wide range of areas:

What seemed like very small things taken together give a little less confidence, a little less breadth of experience. The teacher didn't have time to spend with him individually. It was going to be quite hard for him to compete and it is about getting him over a series of obstacles and these are hidden obstacles, they are not overt...he had no real contact with anyone who had been to university (extract from mentor interview).

Paul achieved the required grades, attained the necessary UKCAT score and had a successful interview. He is now studying dentistry and is in his second year. He is still supported by his mentor.

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS – A MENTOR'S ROLE

Sally is a retired academic of 40 years experience. On applying to the mentoring programme she described her possible contribution to the project as such:

I can deliver specific subject support on biology and geography etc. (I would really struggle with maths). Happy to give general support and advice on preparing for university learning etc (extract from mentor application form).

² See <http://www.gla.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/reach/>

Sally was paired with June, a young woman who entered S6 following successful higher examinations in which she achieved grades of BBBC. June was undecided about what to apply for at university and unsure that she could achieve the necessary grades in S6 to secure her chosen course. During one interview Sally recalled that June had been given notes about a topic that the teacher was not actually going to be able to cover in detail during classwork. June was worried that this was an impossible task for her and that her overall grade would suffer. Sally had experience in the subject area but recognised that the assistance June needed was in how to approach reading about and understanding the topic. Sally focused on helping June to read more independently, identify the key issues, progress her understanding of the topic and make her own notes. In parallel with such specific study support June and her mentor discussed her thoughts about university and the different options open to her. These discussions were carried out in mixture of one to one meetings and email correspondence:

Mentor: ‘...Have you managed your visit to Stirling University yet? I hope you do get to see that campus and get some sense of the student life in a place like that. How did the geography prelim go? Did the work we did on the Colorado River pay off? Have you identified parts of the curriculum we should investigate before the Highers themselves? Are there some other things you would like me to discuss with you? Let me know and I will try to maintain our conversations in writing while I am away (extract from email correspondence).

June: Thanks for taking the time to write to me, I hope your enjoying your time in America and enjoy your break with your husband. I haven't visited Stirling University yet and still haven't had a reply to my university application to them. I was at Glasgow University last week with my school and got a feel of what student life will be like as I participated in a seminar and got a tour of the university. The geography prelim went great!! I got 91% in paper 2 which is the paper where the Colorado River was in it and I would like to take this time to thank you for all the help you gave me. I also got 72% in paper 1 which have me an overall mark of 82%. This then means I got that A I really wanted and needed (extract from email correspondence).

Sally felt that the one to one conversations they had were crucial to June's success and were times when she could receive support that was difficult to access anywhere else:

I was matched with June because she needed an A in geography. This student picked up clues and ideas in our conversations and followed them up. For example we were talking about Stirling University as a campus experience. I suggested that she should read Virginia Wolf's "A Room of One's Own". I recommended as an easy weekend read. Next time we met she had read the book and was looking for more! The meetings were dialogues where June set the agenda and I contributed my experience and views. It was a privilege to see this young woman gain confidence and assurance. At the end of one meeting I commented "June you are just the kind of person who needs to go to university. You have just the right interests and approach to learning. You will love the experience!" She grew two inches beside

me. Had no one else told her she was academic and intelligent? June got her required A grade and is now studying at the University of Glasgow (extract from mentor notes).

As June's university applications were considered she received a rejection from one of her main choices on the basis of her higher results. This was a surprise to June and her mentor. June was disappointed by this and her confidence that she could progress into HE was shaken. Sally drew on her contacts within HE to discover that this was not a routine or indeed correct response from the institution. She encouraged June to request an explanation from the university as to the grounds for her rejection. June was unaware that this was possible and felt that it was too forward or impertinent a tactic. However Sally persisted by urging June to assert herself more fully and take responsibility for the situation given the implications it may have for her future. Sally emphasized to June that she had the capacity to assert herself as a young independent woman who '...could make her own way and decide her own future'. The outcome was that June questioned her rejection, an error was detected and she received a revised offer.

Sally found these instances in her mentoring role to be extremely rewarding. She considered specific subject support as useful in establishing her relationships with young people but emphasized the value of the role of a friend as crucial:

I felt at first I would be like a grandmother! But I didn't. I ended up more like a friend, a good friend a different friend...so I have got this mission now almost of seeing this girl not get just to university but to graduate (extract from mentor notes).

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS – PUPIL REFLECTIONS

Jackie was invited to join the mentoring programme in her 6th year at school. The following account of her experience of the programme was written as she entered her second year at university.

When I met my mentor in 6th year it was evident from the first meeting I would greatly benefit from the process. Although the process was new I connected with my mentor due to the common interest in English. I received a lot of help from my mentor over the course of the year ranging from simply discussing university to annotation of poetry and help with my advanced higher dissertation and creative writing. My mentor discussed my options with me about university as I wasn't entirely sure what career path I wanted to follow. I was interested in studying English, History or Law but I finally decided to pursue Law. The support my mentor was able to offer was entirely different from the help I received at home or at school. Although I received a great deal of support from my English teacher I was able to have more time and specific help from my mentor. The support also differed from home in that I could discuss English and poetry with someone who knew a great deal about it being a retired English teacher. It also helped discussing university as no one in my family has been to university before and knew little about the process of applying or choosing the best course to suit me. I think the mentoring process as a whole is fantastic and I feel it is something more pupils should be able to benefit from. The mentoring process has made me more confident in discussing my ideas as I found being treated equally from someone who had more experience gave me

confidence in my abilities and putting forward my thoughts. I also feel it helped a great deal in ensuring that I chose the best course for me as I was able to fully discuss my options with someone who had more life experience and knowledge of some of the professions I was interested in.

It is important to note that for the young people like Jackie and for her peers on the mentoring programme, successful standard grade examination results in their S4 year³ was often their first convincing indication of their academic potential. This was followed by a realisation for some that university and perhaps a professional career was now a realistic option for them. While mentoring provided a vital role in supporting and realising these new ambitions it had only a small window in which to make progress as within the Scottish system young people progress from Higher National examinations to Higher and Advanced Higher examinations in successive years leaving many pupils a little over 13 months to identify a career and navigate towards it. There is also the added difficulty of choosing appropriate subjects at the correct time in order to satisfy different course entry requirements. This is not the smooth transition that Archer *et al* alluded to for young people from the middle classes. Rather it is a pressured and uncertain time during which the young people have much to learn, have little room to make mistakes and must constantly reaffirm their ambitions against a back-drop of wavering self-confidence and financial pressures.

DISCUSSION

The data presented above offer us an in-depth insight into the role of mentoring. Perhaps most easily identifiable is the young people's reliance on their mentors as a source of different forms of knowledge and support. In the initial stages of the process a number of the mentor/mentee relationships could have been characterised as closer to tutoring than mentoring. An academic focus was practical in early meetings as it provided useful commonality for mentor/mentee discussions. As relationships developed, this focus appeared to broaden. Paul's mentor was critical to equipping him with an understanding of what a career in medicine and then dentistry would actually involve. This helped him gain an understanding of the profession he was interested in but also, crucially, enabled him to orientate correctly towards a successful application. Work experience, voluntary work, engagement with current affairs and practising the UKCAT were vital aspects of Paul's entry into dentistry and were identified as important, organised and supported by his mentor. Likewise Jackie drew on her mentor to help her understand her different options and the careers that each could lead to. Her eventual focus on and successful entry into studying law followed advice and discussion with her mentor as well as targeted academic support with her English.

These data illustrate a range of different challenges experienced by the young people and are representative of the wider 'pressures of school, community and society' acting on young people and which St Clair, Kintrea & Houston (2011) urge that developmental work should now be focused on. Certainly the cumulative impact of these challenges may lead to the 'circumscribing' of the

³ Fourth year of secondary school, approximate age 15.

young people's aspirations as identified by Archer Hollingworth & Mendick (2010). However these findings also resonate closely with the work of Abelev and the concept of an *interactional deficit* in particular. The young people on the mentoring programme were academically able and indeed aspired to go to university; yet even with satisfactory higher grades their progress was problematic and uncertain. In a situation where some independent schools provide dedicated UKCAT lessons for pupils, Paul would have been at a disadvantage had his mentor not known the landscape and helped him to navigate it more successfully. Likewise, June had accepted a rejection from one of her chosen universities before being encouraged by her mentor to consider what had happened, to seek explanation and successfully challenge the decision.

A proportion of mentors efforts were therefore focused around mentees' interactional deficits and ranged from supporting the acquisition of illusive practical knowledge such as practising the UKCAT to wider issues of challenging institutional decisions, cultivating mentees' general knowledge, their vocabulary, use of language and even their tastes in literature. The 'interactional deficits' that the data shows the young people were subject to are arguably the product of higher education, whose recruitment processes operationalise and sustain a normative middle class habitus. Through addressing 'deficits' in their mentees' language, vocabulary, general knowledge and on two occasions their clothing for interview, mentors had to make explicit that which was implicitly expected of young people in their application process to higher education. The findings of this project further concur with Abelev (2009, p.127) in suggesting that part of what the mentors had to nurture in mentees was not just a growing knowledge of opportunities and resources but a sense of their personal entitlement to these.

In terms of the development of mentoring it is important to recognise that success in addressing these issues was dependant upon ongoing, supportive, mentoring relationships. Paul relied on his mentor to maintain his confidence as he addressed each hurdle of the application process and moved incrementally closer to realising his ambition. June experienced difficulties in her studying and had a rejection from one university application. These events shook their self-confidence and threatened her continued interest in moving into HE but her mentor provided the support necessary for her to reconsider her position, adapt her plans and renew her confidence and enthusiasm. Such involved and very personal support was only possible within relationships between mentors that could support high levels of mutual understanding and trust. For some, this ensured an ongoing mentoring role as the young people progressed into higher education.

A necessary element of this process was the time which individual mentors were able to dedicate towards the mentoring process. Drawing largely from retired professionals the project was able to establish weekly and at times fortnightly meetings between mentors and mentees. Considering the time needed for mentors to travel to and from the school and to conduct the necessary research to support their mentees, the time commitment from each mentor was close to one half day per week. This represents a considerable resource being mobilised at minimal cost and being made available to the school

community and other existing programmes to widen access. The project illustrates that mentors have the capacity to act as catalysts in the process of supporting young people into higher education. The evidence also suggests that many mentors (as illustrated by Sally) personally valued their role, reported the process as very satisfying and continued their mentoring in successive years with new mentees.

CONCLUSION

At first glance the evidence from this study aligns with the wider, largely international literature on mentoring. While operating in a different cultural context to much of the US based research, the study also points towards the value of mentoring as an intervention for higher attaining young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Building on the evidence of much of the UK literature, this is a model of mentoring which presents an affordable opportunity for intervening to support widening access to higher education. The data collected as part of the research dimension further suggests that mentoring of the kind described has the potential to foster the social capital identified by Archer *et al* as being crucial to 'levelling the playing field' for pupils experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Indeed, engaging with mentoring as an intervention from a research and development perspective is crucial. A research informed examination of the mentoring process doesn't just help provide a model for effective mentoring. It also provides identification and understanding of the processes by which young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are placed at a disadvantage as they seek progression into higher education. It illuminates more precisely the reality of inequality, the ways in which these young people may struggle to engage with institutions and those institutional processes with which their more socio-economically advantaged (and thus culturally literate) peers are more familiar and less intimidated by.

The illumination of these processes and the manner in which they can be addressed will be crucial as Scotland progresses towards the implementation of outcome agreements for HEIs which demand increases to the numbers of students entering higher education from low socio-economic backgrounds. The persistent policy focus on addressing the deficits of this group of young people needs to now shift towards challenging the structural barriers that can stunt their educational progress. A focus on expanding intergenerational mentoring offers one, research informed and innovative practical step towards this. An iterative form of research and development in this area will provide opportunity for mentoring to be informed and refined as it progresses. Most crucially, intergenerational mentoring offers a process, long awaited, through which social and cultural capital can be infused.

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