SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

JOURNAL of COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY WILEY

Examining holistically the experiences of mentors in school-based programs: A logic analysis

Maria Vittoria Bufali[1] 🆔 | Graham Connelly[2] | Alec Morton[1]

[1]Department of Management Science, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

[2]Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

Correspondence
Maria Vittoria Bufali, Department of Management Science, University of Strathclyde, 199 Cathedral St, Glasgow, UK.
Email: mariavittoria.bufali@gmail.com

Funding information
University of Strathclyde

Abstract

The article presents a Logic Analysis of the Scottish MCR ("Motivation, Commitment and Resilience") Pathways school-based mentoring scheme. MCR Pathways provides vulnerable secondary school students with one-to-one support, helping them realize their full potential through education. The perceptions of 12 mentors were explored through interviews, thematically analyzed and mapped to derive the program's Theory of Change as regards the volunteers themselves. This model was then assessed against the evidence base yielded from prior studies. The evaluation highlighted a mismatch between mentors' outcome expectations and what they actually gained from the experience. Furthermore, some themes (e.g., being driven by community concerns) turned out to be more prominent in the context of this specific scheme than in the wider literature, as opposed to other ones (e.g., developing friendships). The study generates insights into the ways to attract and retain growing numbers of volunteers, as well as to advance scientific knowledge.

KEYWORDS
mentor recruitment, mentor retention, program theory-driven evaluation, school-based youth mentoring, volunteer management

1 | INTRODUCTION

Given the raising community concerns for the well-being and positive development of vulnerable school-age youth, mentoring has soared in popularity as increasingly seen as a promising preventive intervention for tackling disadvantage, social exclusion and educational disengagement among young people (D. L. Dubois et al., 2011; Fassetta et al., 2014; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2011). Within the broader youth mentoring movement, the specific formal and site-based approach of school-based mentoring (SBM) has recently undergone a particularly marked diffusion, being recognized as the fastest growing form of mentoring in the US (Bayer et al., 2015; Grossman et al., 2012).

Whilst the tremendous expansion of SBM resulted in much attention being paid to evaluating its impacts for the direct beneficiaries and from their perspective, the experiences of the volunteer mentors remained relatively underexplored. Nevertheless, giving closer consideration to these experiences seems important for at least three reasons. Firstly, it would facilitate the establishment of mentoring relationships (MRs) better positioned to endure over time. Indeed, mentors' burnout or dissatisfaction can be a key reason why MRs end up being particularly short-lived, with negative repercussions for the mentees as well (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Grossman et al., 2012; Spencer et al., 2017). Secondly, learning what benefits the volunteers pursue and realize through mentoring may help to recruit more mentors and reduce attrition rates (Stukas et al., 2013), a looming challenge for mentoring organizations. Lastly, evidencing the broader, indirect impacts of these interventions would yield a fuller picture of their contribution, a key asset in securing funding (Meltzer & Saunders, 2020).

The present article describes a qualitative inquiry addressed to explore the perspectives and experiences of those mentoring within the MCR ("Motivation, Commitment and Resilience") Pathways SBM program in Scotland. More explicitly, it seeks to address the following set of research questions: (i) in which ways does this specific SBM scheme achieve its intended mentor outcomes?; (ii) are there points of differentiation with what is reported in pertinent research literature?; (iii) what can be learned from this? The article first reviews extant research into the mechanisms of change through which SBM influences the mentors, highlighting the gaps that prior contributions left in current knowledge and providing a justification for the current study. Subsequently, the data collection and analytic strategies and results of the enquiry are outlined. Finally, some conclusive remarks are drawn, to elucidate in which ways the study extends prior knowledge and its main limitations.

2 | BACKGROUND

A recent systematic literature review (Bufali, 2022) located a total of 57 enquiries focused on the experiences of those who volunteer as mentors in educational settings (i.e., schools or higher education institutions). Among these, 43 sources specifically dealt with interventions delivered in educational institutions' premises and addressed to youth (up to high school). This section reviews narratively the knowledge arising from this latter sub-set of studies as to SBM mentors': (i) motivations; (ii) positive outcomes. Then, it delineates some of the major shortcomings of this stream of research, which our contribution aims to overcome.

2.1 | Knowledge about mentors' motivations

Reviewed studies often describe the hoped-for gains of serving as mentors, with 22 sources providing some evidence as to why people become involved in mentoring. Reported reasons often trace back to the altruistic desire to assist children in need or to make a difference in their lives (Caldarella et al., 2009; Fassetta et al., 2014; Raven, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2004; Tracey et al., 2014). Often, would-be mentors are driven by the prospect of passing on life experience or professional knowledge, to help their protégés build some skills, or set and achieve goals and

ambitions (Fassetta et al., 2014; Hughes & Dykstra, 2008; Hughes et al., 2009; Tracey et al., 2014). Also, individuals may see mentoring as a way of getting a deeper understanding of socio-cultural matters (O'Shea et al., 2013), learning how to build positive relationships with others (Hughes & Dykstra, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2004) or simply challenging their abilities (Wasburn-Moses et al., 2014). Another frequently mentioned driver is the sense of fulfillment, reward or personal enjoyment candidate mentors expect to attain from interacting with protégés or actually making a difference (Caldarella et al., 2009; Fassetta et al., 2014; Schmidt et al., 2004; Strapp et al., 2014; Tracey et al., 2014). Other anticipated benefits relate to mentors' professional endeavors. For example, mentoring may be seen as a means to pursue a mentoring-driven professional growth, build the CV/résumé or confirm the interest in a certain career (Ernst & Young, 2015; Hughes & Dykstra, 2008; McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2004). Beyond this, mentoring can afford people the opportunity to feel part of a community, contributing to its development by combating socioeconomic inequalities in a direct and hands-on way, or of purpose-driven organizations (Caldarella et al., 2009; Ernst & Young, 2015; Fassetta et al., 2014; Monk et al., 2014; Tracey et al., 2014). Also, several individuals relate their choice to become mentors to their past experiences, such as having formerly received guidance and encouragement from a mentor or, conversely, having lacked positive mentorship (Caldarella et al., 2009; Monk et al., 2014). Similarly, those who faced some educational challenges may be driven by a sense of obligation to youngsters who are confronted with comparable issues (Ernst & Young, 2015; O'Shea et al., 2013). Finally, participants may feel that they can use the skills and knowledge acquired through their studies, professions or other past experiences (e.g., mentoring informally or in the workplace, volunteering in different fields, etc.) to positively affect a young person's life (Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010).

2.2 | Knowledge about mentors' positive outcomes

Likewise, all but two of these enquiries documented the varied positive outcomes accrued to mentors, which either mirrored or exceeded their expectations.

First, mentors achieve individual outcomes in the form of a socio-emotional or cognitive personal growth. For instance, by acknowledging the contributions made, mentors overwhelmingly derive personal satisfaction, sense of purpose and pride, confidence in themselves or their skills and knowledge, as well as their ability to pass them on (Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; Elli & Granvill, 1999; Fassetta et al., 2014; Hughes & Dykstra, 2008; McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; O'Shea et al., 2013; Raven, 2015; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010; Tracey et al., 2014). Also, when asked to describe experienced benefits, mentors' accounts most frequently refer to learning. Indeed, participation often pushes mentors to develop greater awareness and understanding about positive youth development (PYD), the wider educational system, or the academic and developmental disadvantage affecting students from impoverished or minority backgrounds (Hughes et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2010; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; O'Shea et al., 2016; Terry, 1999; Trepanler-Street, 2007; Weiler et al., 2013), as well as openness to others' viewpoints, which leads them to think differently, gain new perspectives or overcome prejudices (Banks, 2010; Hughes et al., 2012; McGill, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2013; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010; Tracey et al., 2014). Moreover, the self-reflection stimulated by the experience often provides mentors with valuable insights into their individual journeys, making them more aware of their strengths or limitations, identity, personality or future ambitions (Hughes et al., 2012; McGill, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2013; Raven, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2004; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010; Tracey et al., 2014).

Second, mentors' reports often concern the relational outcomes gained. In most of the cases, mentors believe they benefited greatly from the experience in terms of skill-building, particularly when it comes to learning to deal with children, building empathy or compassion, sharpening communication, active listening, coaching, leadership, teamwork, support-seeking, time-management or diversity skills, or refining their own ability to appropriately apply self-disclosure, patience or perseverance (Cavell et al., 2018; Herrera et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2015;

McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; O'Shea et al., 2013; Tracey et al., 2014; Weiler et al., 2013). Interestingly, mentors often recognize that these skills had been or could be positively applied to relationships with significant others (Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2010; McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; Tracey et al., 2014). In addition to this, the feeling of friendship developed among mentors, as well as the sense of belongingness and connectedness stemming from close-knit group dynamics, are frequently among the personal outcomes reported (Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; Herrera et al., 2008; McGill, 2012; Monk et al., 2014; O'Shea et al., 2013; Pryce et al., 2015; Raven, 2015; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010).

Third, as increasingly acknowledged by employers as well (Ernst & Young, 2015), mentors gain a number of practical, work-related outcomes. These include the development of contacts or skills deemed essential for success in their professions or studies, recalling "forgotten" knowledge, improving their sense of competence or thinking through their work from different perspectives, improving the relationships established with co-workers, gaining clarity on the career path they want to undertake or feeling well-suited for job positions that involve substantial mentoring tasks (Banks, 2010; Ernst & Young, 2015; Herrera et al., 2008; Hughes & Dykstra, 2008; Marshall et al., 2015; McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020; O'Shea et al., 2016; Raven, 2015; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010; Trepanler-Street, 2007).

2.3 | Knowledge gaps

These findings appear extremely encouraging, given the variety of motivating factors and outcomes documented. However, it is argued that this strand of literature still suffers from various limitations, so that more exploration of some aspects of program participation is warranted. First, *qualitative* analyses (10 in total) are in short supply, confirming that, so far, relatively scarce attention has been given to exploring—through such approaches—the ways in which SBM can have an impact on the volunteers themselves. Second, extant research has largely focussed on student mentors (77% of the reviewed studies), so that little is known on which are the managerial practices best suited to strengthen the initial and ongoing engagement of different demographic groups. Third, prior studies are mostly descriptive of motives or positive outcomes. Indeed, they largely overlooked the negative outcomes incurred by mentors (explicitly addressed only by three studies) or the enabling/hindering factors at work (about half of the studies), struggling to unveil under what conditions positive change occurs. In this respect, only one evaluation (McGill, 2012; McGill et al., 2015) sought to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework summarizing the theory according to which SBM brings about positive change, explicitly addressing the interplay among process constitutive parts (e.g., motives, outcomes, factors). This model, however, is considered somewhat questionable, as bearer of an overly simplistic conceptualization of the mentoring process.

Overall, it seems that there is still much to be learned about the experiences of volunteer mentors and a persisting need to turn greater attention specifically to the examination of the negative impacts of participation and the factors determining mentor outcomes and continued engagement. This study intends to address this gap in knowledge by providing a comprehensive outline of the change process experienced by the mentors of an existing SBM program.

3 | METHODS

The study traces back to the broader approach of program theory-driven evaluation (PTDE), whose main output is usually represented by a framework that schematically portrays the main mechanisms and underlying assumptions according to which a program is supposed to achieve its intended outcomes (so-called program theory). In particular, it relied on a Logic Analysis (LA): a three-step "evaluation that allows us to test the plausibility of a program's theory using available scientific knowledge—either scientific evidence or expert knowledge"

(Brousselle & Champagne, 2011; p. 70). As a first step, the analysis produces a preliminary Theory of Change (ToC) depicting how the program in action (i.e., the MCR Pathways scheme) is expected to work, in this case, in the perspective of mentors. A ToC can be broadly defined as "a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context" (Center for Theory of Change, 2022) and implies identifying all those conditions required for certain desired goals to occur. The current study explores the change process experienced by those who decide to volunteer as mentors and focuses on two goals of strategic importance for the management of mentoring programs: an individual's decision to (i) become a mentor; (ii) keep mentoring over time. In the second place, extant scientific knowledge is reviewed, synthesized and drawn on to derive a conceptual framework (CF) that summarizes the causal chains toward the effects as understood and reported by prior research. In the conclusive stage, a "plausibility check" is performed to assess the degree of consistency between the theories captured in the two previous outputs. The practical usefulness of engaging in such an elaborated analytic procedure precisely lies in revealing in which respects the program theory fits with or deviates from current knowledge about best-practices, indicating the strategies and corrective actions that can be undertaken to further develop the program's ability to achieve its desired outcomes.

Within this study, while the evidence that populated the two frameworks (ToC and CF) came from distinct sources, the analytic approach adopted was consistent. For this reason, we first illustrate separately the data collection methods distinctively used in Steps 1 and 2. Next, we describe jointly how the two sets of data were analyzed and the "plausibility check" performed.

3.1 | Data collection Step 1 (ToC)

3.1.1 | Setting and participants

The scheme featured in the current study is a formal school-based mentoring (SBM) program run by the charity MCR Pathways since 2007. Initially delivered in just one site, the program was piloted in an additional five schools, before going through a larger-scale rollout. At the end of 2018, all the 30 secondary schools in Glasgow City Council's remit were served. The program stemmed from the desire to attenuate the transmission of child and youth disadvantage into adult life by providing extra one-to-one support to the most disadvantaged secondary school pupils in Glasgow, Scotland. In particular, at its onset, the program was addressed to an extremely vulnerable segment of the youth population: young people who were or had been looked after by local authorities. Nonetheless, nowadays, care-experienced youth account for approximatively 60% of the beneficiaries of the program (MCR Pathways, 2017), which also serves youth not formally assisted by social workers, but facing other nonnegligible forms of disadvantage. Acknowledging the extent of the educational challenges these pupils may face, the charity recruits community adult volunteers who establish one-to-one MRs with these young people, seeking to help them discover their talents and realize their full potential. The mentor-mentee pairs meet weekly in one-hour sessions taking place throughout at least one academic year and, ordinarily, on the school's premises.

This study draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 12 volunteers of this SBM program and examines how they viewed their experiences as mentors of at-risk young people. After receiving ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde Department of Management Science Ethics Committee, the MCR central team received clear instructions about the criteria for inclusion to follow to select study participants. Indeed, potential participants had to be identified based on a number of characteristics that could be assessed a priori and were deemed highly influential as to several aspects of the mentors' volunteering experience. Furthermore, their selection mostly conformed to a proportional quota sampling strategy (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Hence, the composition of the sample resembles the proportions characterizing the wider population of MCR mentors across a variety of dimensions (Supporting Information: Appendix A), such as: mentors' gender, age, or affiliation (i.e., corporate or individual volunteer); mentee's status (i.e., looked after by the local authority or not) and school's characteristics

(e.g., location; level of risk; year of adoption of the program). This proportionality principle could not be adhered to only with respect to two dimensions: the length of mentoring service (more/less than 2 years) and of the match (more/less than 20 meetings).

3.1.2 | Procedure

The staff established an initial contact with individuals presenting the desired profile, assessing their interest in participating. Having gained a first expression of interest, the researcher shared via email supporting materials which further delineated in an accessible way study objectives and the implications of participation. All the individuals approached expressed their informed consent to participate and to be audio-recorded.

Insights into MCR Pathways mentors' experiences were gained using semi-structured interviews. Mentors, identified using pseudonyms hereafter, were interviewed through video conferencing platforms, with discussions lasting 40–70 min. The guide for the individual interviews was developed by consulting similar published protocols (McGill, 2012; Vareilles et al., 2015). It consisted of a list of interview questions (see Supporting Information), designed to seek reports of:

1. what influenced participants' decisions to become mentors and what they expected to get out of the experience (motivations and sought-after outcomes);
2. the gains acquired (experienced positive outcomes);
3. the unintended, adverse ways mentoring may have influenced volunteers' lives (negative outcomes and feelings);
4. the factors that most eased or hindered the attainment of outcomes (facilitators and barriers);
5. the mechanisms and patterns through which outcomes were realized.

3.2 | Data collection Step 2 (CF)

3.2.1 | Search strategy

The literature-based CF rests on a systematic literature review illustrated in greater detail elsewhere (Bufali, 2022). The literature search aimed at locating prior empirical studies focused on the experiences (e.g., motives, outcomes, satisfaction, etc.) of volunteers within mentoring programs provided in educational settings. Potentially eligible sources were retrieved by searching four databases (APA PsycInfo, ERIC, Medline and Social Science Premium Collection), combined with those of two subject-specific journals: "Children and Youth Services Review" and "Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning". After applying pre-established exclusion criteria, 32 sources were retained. Further candidate studies were directly sourced through: (i) the screening of the reference lists of previously included studies; (ii) hand searching Scopus, to detect more recent publications referring to included sources. These additional steps located a further 25 studies, with a total of 57 included studies. Most of them (i.e., the 43 studies on which we focus) considered programs delivered in educational institutions' premises and addressed to youth (whereas, in the remaining 14 cases, the schemes targeted university/college students).

3.2.2 | Included studies

The sub-set of 43 empirical inquiries considered in the current study focused on the experiences of those who volunteer as mentors in educational settings and dealt with interventions addressed to youth (up to high school).

Most of the SBM schemes featured in these 43 studies were implemented in North America (77%), with some cases drawn from the Australian (9%), the UK (7%), or Italian (2%) context. Despite the variability in programmatic features, the majority of programs entailed weekly (51%) one-to-one (40%) mentoring meetings. As to participants' profiles, mentored youth were respectively enrolled in: high school (28%), middle school (26%), elementary/pre-school (26%) or a mix of the former (21%). Most of the times (72%), the schemes involved (exclusively or in part) pupils identified as being "at-risk." Recruited mentors were mainly females (86% of cases) and under 40 (77%), as about three-quarters of the programs relied primarily on high school or university/college student volunteers. It is also worth noting that only 10 studies (23%) employed strictly qualitative research methods, while 51% quantitative ones and 26% blended (i.e., multi or mixed) methods.

3.3 | Data analysis Steps 1 and 2

3.3.1 | Thematic analysis

Using NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018), data either from the interviews (audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim) or the studies included in the literature review were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From an epistemological standpoint, in keeping with a critical realist stance (Brousselle & Buregeya, 2018), an abductive approach (A. Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014) was taken to generate both the frameworks. While the analysis was approached with a set of preconceived, theory-driven categories, field evidence allowed population of the codebook with several novel constructs. In particular, the preliminary template was grounded in a deep-rooted theoretic perspective: the functional approach (Clary et al., 1992, 1998). The latter rests on the premise that individuals are drawn to volunteer opportunities for a multiplicity of reasons, covered by the 30-item Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). These include the need: to give effect to prosocial values ("Values"); to learn more about oneself, others and the world, ("Understanding") or gain experiences/skills/contacts that can pay off in terms of professional advancement ("Career"); to strengthen ties with social reference groups ("Social"); and, finally, to pursue ego protection ("Protective") or development ("Enhancement"). In addition to this, elements from extant academic sources informed the conceptualization of: mentors' additional motives and rewards (Ferro, 2012; Teye & Peaslee, 2020); unanticipated negative outcomes and feelings (McGill et al., 2015; Stukas et al., 2009); or processual barriers and facilitators (Harris & Nakkula, 2008; Martin & Sifers, 2012; McGill et al., 2015; Rubin & Thorelli, 1984). An iterative process of refinement led to the final codebook, which includes both the initial and conclusive sub-themes. It illustrates the coding hierarchy, such that more discrete items are grouped into higher-level headings, in turn divided into broader conceptual categories: motives and positive outcomes that can be either traced back to the well-known VFI or not; negative outcomes and feelings incurred by mentors; and process factors (further divided into barriers and facilitators). To facilitate a holistic appraisal of both primary and secondary data, the results of the thematic analysis have been tabulated by creating matrices (see Supporting Information) that show which sub-themes (rows) have been discussed by which interviewees/sources (columns).

3.3.2 | Mapping

Using the Decision Explorer 3.5.0 software (Banxia Software Ltd., 2017), the codified extracts were visually rearranged adhering to the mapping technique put forward by Eden (1988), to produce coherent pictures of the program functioning respectively according to field evidence and extant scientific knowledge. These maps appear as "directed" graphs, wherein arrows connect means and ends, delineating alleged causal relationships (the concept at the arrowhead is assumed to be influenced by the tail statement). Usually, at their top, we find high-order goals that an organization pursues, with more detailed avenues leading to them (chains of events/enabling conditions)
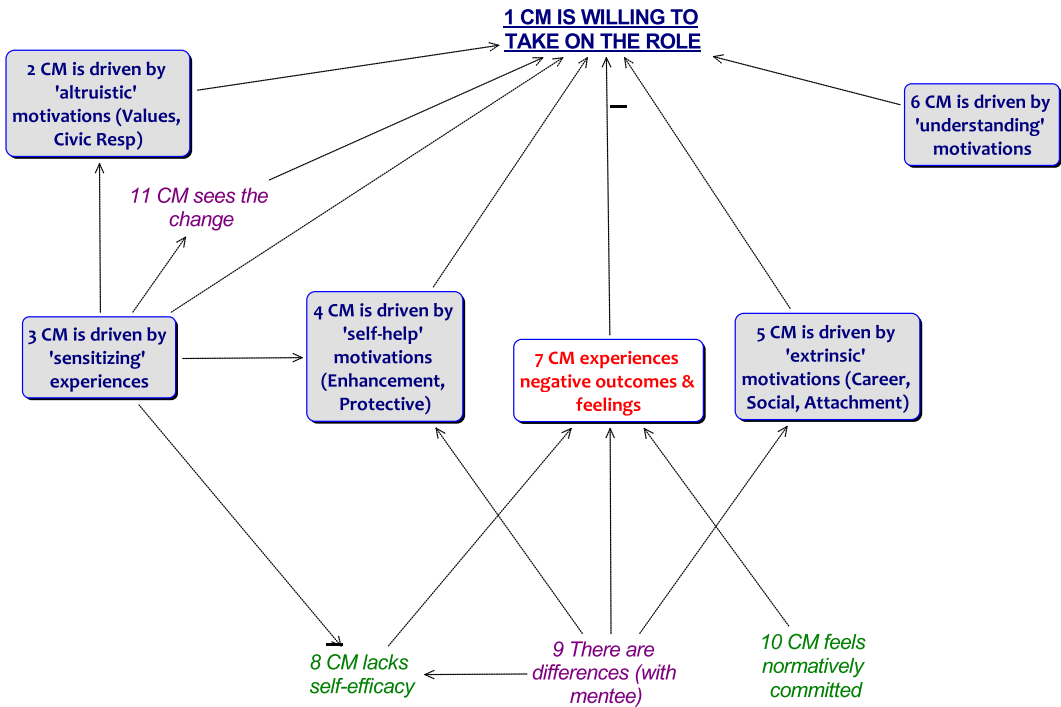
FIGURE 1   Decision to take on the role

unfolding underneath. As anticipated, in the current study, concepts are pooled into two clusters, respectively culminating with the decision: (i) to take on the mentoring role (Figure 1); (ii) to renew one's commitment to mentoring (Figure 2).

It is worth stressing that whilst the tables produced allow ranking the various themes surfaced based on their prevalence, the pictorial models unveil the intricate net of relationships among process components, as well as their often-ambivalent nature. Also, computer-assisted analyses can further facilitate the identification of some informative structural features of the maps. For instance, domain analysis (Eden et al., 1992) returns information about the number of arrows pointing to or departing from a concept. This has been used to detect the 10 most interlinked nodes of the maps, namely those that affect and are affected by the greatest number of other elements (full results given in Supporting Information: Appendix B).

3.4 | Data analysis Step 3

In the conclusive step, "direct logic analysis" (Brousselle & Champagne, 2011; p. 70) is used to evaluate the program-specific model (ToC) and its discrete components against the motives, outcomes, enabling/impeding mechanisms reported in pertinent academic literature. For the sake of synthesis and to not overwhelm readers, the data underpinning this step will be reported in a summary table, which will help emphasize the aspects that bring together or distinguish the different bodies of evidence examined. The "plausibility check" entailed in this step also involved MCR managers in contrasting the two theories and challenging the analyses conducted. In particular, selected staff members were invited to review the write-up of the study, hence being given the opportunity to question and reflect upon its preliminary findings and their connection to established managerial practices. At the same time, they were encouraged to provide feedback to be incorporated in data interpretation and reporting.
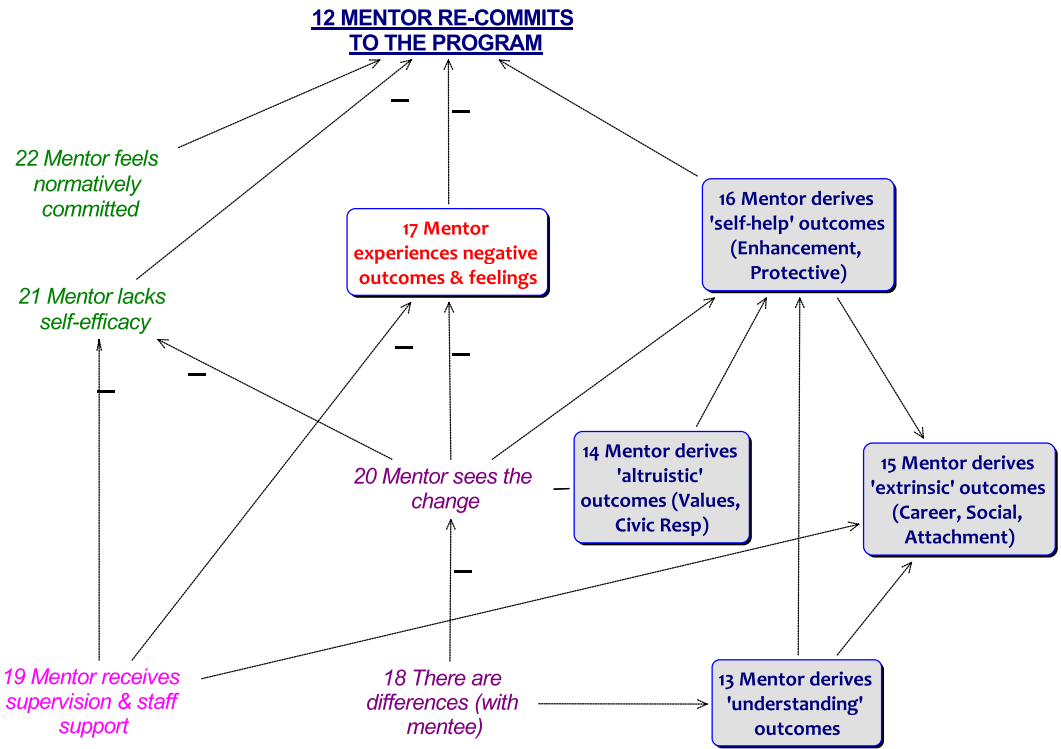
FIGURE 2 Decision to re-commit

Thereby, this step provided an arena to test the soundness and exhaustiveness of the ToC produced, as well as its consistency with the CF, so as to pinpoint strengths and/or weaknesses of the MCR Pathways *modus operandi*.

4 | RESULTS

This section first describes in a nutshell the program-specific ToC derived as previously explained. Then, it reports more detailed evidence about some particularly meaningful map elements drawing on the thematic and domain analysis of MCR interviewees' accounts, respectively about: (i) motivations; (ii) positive outcomes; (iii) negative outcomes; (iv) facilitators and barriers. Finally, it summarizes the key insights uncovered by the conclusive step of the LA.

4.1 | ToC

Given the richness of the model obtained (Supporting Information: Appendix B), a simplified version is provided here, wherein only some higher-level motivational or outcome categories are reported. Furthermore, only those factors which turned out to be among the 10 most influential concepts in the map—as the domain analysis highlighted—and broadly discussed by interviewees have been included.

Mentors' motives and positive/negative outcomes are reported within squared boxes. Those concepts not framed in boxes are, instead, processual factors, which— relating to programmatic, relational, individual aspects or the broader social ecology—enables or hinder the realization of outcomes. Finally, as regards the connections

among concepts, arrow heads with a negative sign attached ("-") indicate that the tail statement *negatively* affects the concept at the other end of the arrow (e.g., experiencing feelings of fear or hesitation reduces the willingness to become a mentor).

As concerns the decision to take on the mentor role (Figure 1), according to interviewees' accounts, the three factors at the bottom of the graph (confidence about one's own mentoring abilities; anticipated within-pair differences; sense of obligation to carry the MR forward) were associated with experiencing some negative outcomes or feelings. These, in turn, could discourage participation in the mentoring program. Among them, only the second one was identified as the precondition to fulfill some sought-after outcomes. At the same time, certain "sensitizing experiences" made interviewees feel better equipped or inclined to mentor at-risk youth and fueled further ("altruistic" or "self-help") motivations to become mentors. This, coupled with the pursuit of some knowledge or career-related gains, generally favored the decision to join the program.

Moving to the decision to renew one's own commitment to mentoring (Figure 2), the model stresses that the quality of both the match (within-pair differences) and of the supervision and staff support received affects the mentor journey. Indeed, the former factor drives the level of understanding gained by the mentor and the likelihood of observing the desired change in the mentee (both conditions associated with the attainment of additional intermediate outcomes). The latter, instead, was seen by interviewees as key to lessen the detrimental effect of a lack of self-confidence and of some negative feelings experienced over the decision to continue. Finally, while some mentors saw their decision to re-commit as resulting from the benefits attained, others ascribed it to a sense of "normative commitment" (intended as a sense of obligation to carry forward the MR in order not to let down or harm the mentee).

4.2 | Motivations

Mentors' motives for mentoring at-risk youth were a primary area of concern. All interviewees endorsed multiple and mostly other-oriented motivations (Supplementary Information: File 1), primarily seeing mentoring as a means to live up to their altruistic values or as a reflection of their community concerns.

Starting from the sub-themes traceable to the "Values" function of the VFI, the reason most recurrently endorsed (25% of mentors) was helping a young person create and progress toward a better future. For instance, a mentor, reflecting on how much being raised in a nurturing and supportive home environment helped her get on the right track in terms of educational and professional achievements, concluded that:

> [...] knowing that I could help someone else on that journey and maybe be [...] someone on the back who's saying 'Actually you can do this!', giving them that little push that they need ... that for me was one of the main reasons why I wanted to do it. [Eloise]

Interestingly, the discrete item absolutely cited the most (50% of mentors) fell beyond the VFI and related to concepts of paying or giving something back, contributing to enhancing the broader community. In this respect, some mentors felt particularly drawn to mentoring as a way to drive change, actively doing something to transform the society, rather than simply contemplating this ideal or handing money over.

It should also be noted that 75% of participants reported that some prior experiences either made them more sensitive or better prepared for youth mentoring. Coherently, the domain analysis identified these "sensitizing experiences" as the 10th most interlinked concept within the map. Indeed, a number of mentors recounted that they came from underprivileged backgrounds, were first-generation graduate students or had a direct experience of family breakdown, domestic abuse or the care system. So, often they approached mentoring as cognizant of how significantly having had an informal mentor helped them cope with these difficulties:

[...] why I survived was that I had a significant adult, my auntie, who was my strength, she was my role model. [...] And I thought, so many kids, in difficult family situations, need someone out there that's [...] just there for them. [Diane]

Many mentors also spoke about how the mentoring skills acquired both through private or professional experiences made them more confident about their ability to make a difference in a young person's life. These spanned from volunteering at child helplines to befriending vulnerable elderly, from teaching to mental health nursing, from being a parent, aunt/uncle or grandparent to having mentored younger colleagues at the workplace. Some of these drivers, instead, took on more self-interested connotations, such as missing the company of one's own grown-up children, or of youth the mentors usually worked with, or not having had children of your own.

Next to these dominating themes—in ascending order: "Values" (six occurrences), "Civic Responsibility" (seven) and "Sensitizing Experiences" (15)—mentors reported a number of less widespread motivations, suggesting how varied the needs potentially met by this type of volunteering are, even in the context of a single program.

4.3 | Positive outcomes

Mentors described a range of gains (Supplementary Information: File 1) that outnumbered reported motivations (65 occurrences for outcomes, as opposed to 40 for motives). This leads us to believe that the functions mentoring serves are wider and more diverse than mentors would expect. Moreover, the areas where most of the mentors accrued benefits did not match the three dominant motivational domains described above, again suggesting that the former seem often not consciously perceived as attainable gains in the moment mentors decide to sign up.

Most notably, mentors unanimously reported some type of gains in terms of enhancing their understanding (21 occurrences) of oneself, others, or the world. Often (42% of interviewees), mentors got insights into what fosters or, conversely, prevents PYD. Half of the mentors also believed that the experience made them more open-minded and appreciative of others' differing perspectives or even helped them debunk some stereotypes about the educational system or youth themselves:

[...] prior to becoming a mentor, [...] I was very much the kind of person who, if I was out with my friends in a public place and I saw a group of teenagers, I'd be like: "Uh, they are just so loud, they can't behave!" [...] and mentoring has given me an entirely different perspective on it. [Eloise]

An even greater number of mentors (67%) appreciated the learning curve mentoring entailed, as they sharpened a number of skills: from those entailed in trust-building and dealing with youngsters—who might be either too shy or too talkative, or simply from backgrounds that bear no relationship to yours—to communication, listening and coaching skills, or even, finally, to greater empathy or patience.

Another major theme related to the self-enhancement gains accrued to mentors (19 occurrences and the sixth most interlinked concept). These took the form of an overwhelming sense of satisfaction, fulfillment, self-confidence or even pride derived from seeing the mentee making progress, the bond deepening, or knowing that you're doing something worthwhile. Interestingly, at times, these gains stemmed also out of getting an hour away from the working routine, just to breathe and completely focus on someone else, as one mentor described: "[...] every single time you would have this meeting and [...] you would just feel as though an entire weight had been lifted off of your shoulders" [Eloise]. Ultimately, some participants felt mentoring improved their work-life balance, helping them put everyday problems into perspective. Furthermore, while some interviewees acknowledged that the experience improved their relationships with friends or young relatives, for others it was with co-workers: "I was a much better manager. I'm so much a better employee, when I went back to work that day, because I'd had that time away from the office [...]" [Phoebe].

4.4 | Negative outcomes and feelings

Overall, study participants discussed two and a half as many gains as negative outcomes and feelings (Supplementary Information: File 2), which, nonetheless, turned out to be quite common and widespread. Most of these unintended adverse effects related to negative feelings associated with actual or anticipated relational dynamics with the mentee. In particular, several mentors (58%) discussed feelings of hesitation or fear experienced before commit to mentoring (the seventh concept in the domain analysis). These were attributed to a number of factors, such as the perception of not being prepared to handle potentially difficult or even harmful situations, as well as alarming information the mentee may disclose. Others worried that their demanding job commitments could prevent them from being consistent and reliable or felt daunted by the long timeframe a MR can require to thrive. These emotions were also exacerbated by the awareness of not being able to just quit if things did not work out as expected. A few mentors revealed that they feared that their prospective mentee could not accept or like them, potentially disappointed by their personality or age: "And I was a little bit worried about: 'What if they don't like me?' [...] if I was a young person, I think I would probably prefer somebody young [...]" [Vivian]. Other widely discussed negative emotions concerned feelings of discouragement, sadness and frustration (reported by 50% of mentors and the third most influential concept in the map) or even disappointment and upset (33%).

4.5 | Facilitators and barriers

As the number of factors that can affect mentors' experience is relatively large (full details in Supplementary Information: File 3), attention is here drawn only to those four factors that are both highly discussed by interviewees and among the most influential within the ToC, as the domain analysis evidenced (Table 1).

Among the range of programmatic factors identified, a theme that particularly stood out for its salience related to the on-site supervision and support provided by the Program Coordinator (PC), which turned out to be the fifth most interlinked concept in the map. Mentors almost unanimously (92%) identified in the PC a key facilitator of their mentoring journey: somebody who provides encouragement and positive reinforcement when mentors are beset by insecurities, who can check in and keep mentors informed when mentees go through particular issues, as well as an essential reference point when mentors do not know precisely how to respond to mentees' behaviors or statements. For instance, a novice mentor, still grappling with building her mentoring skills, particularly appreciated that the PC initiated each meeting with the mentee. This afforded her the opportunity to observe the PC's reactions to what the mentee brought up, having a sort of benchmark to grasp what should (or not) raise preoccupations:

> So, that's been nice to actually having a bit more contact with the coordinator. It's just a bit of reassurance, like if my mentee says something or brings up a story while XXX [name of the PC] is there, if it's something that normally I'd be like "This sounds a bit dubious" and XXX [name of the PC]

TABLE 1 Incidence of selected factors and their influence within the ToC and CF

| Factors | % of mentors discussing each subtheme | | Ranking | |
	As a barrier	As a facilitator	ToC	CF
Supervision and staff support	25%	92%	5	3
Differences (with mentee)	33%	33%	8	9
Seeing the change	42%	75%	4	2
Self-efficacy	58%	42%	1	6

Abbreviations: CF, conceptual framework; ToC, Theory of Change.

is fine about it, I'm like: "Okay, this is probably like a fine thing. We can just discuss it without worrying. [Celine]

However, some participants (25%) raised some issues as regards the interactions with the PC, which primarily related to the impression of having limited access to face-to-face or phone updates. This sensation was attributed to the fact that—as the reach of the program expands—PCs may appear to be caught up in too many commitments or that direct discussions were appropriate only if there were serious issues to raise, rather than a general unease.

Moving to the relational factors, the fourth most influential concept was "seeing the change", often acting both as a facilitator (75%) and as a barrier (42%). Three-quarters of the participants spoke about the sense of reward and fulfillment derived from seeing the mentee overcoming some problems (e.g., attitudinal, behavioral, academic) or successfully entering higher and further education or the job market. Opposite sentiments arose when things did not progress as expected or desired, which challenged mentors with feelings of frustration and discouragement, or a lack of confidence in their mentoring abilities.

Similar insecurities were triggered also by potential differences with the mentee, the eighth concept in the rank. Some mentors (33%) truly appreciated dealing with pupils with very different attitudes, interests, mindsets or backgrounds. Indeed, this kept their mind "open" and "fresh", made them more understanding or less judgmental and equipped with interpersonal skills that could benefit their other relationships. Conversely, often (33% of cases), navigating these diversities gave rise to some difficulties, concerns, or doubts. For example, one interviewee questioned what a nonnative mentor, from a privileged background, could actually offer to an adolescent with such a different social and home life, being afraid of not being able to find any shared life experience to build on. Another confessed that some problems of the boy she mentored "maybe would have been dealt with had it (the mentor) been a man [...]" [Sally]. Overall, mentors' perspectives as to within-pair differences turned out to be pretty mixed and discordant, as exemplified by the following case. While Vivian, as anticipated, worried about the age gap, Diane saw it as a real asset:

[...] I think having a big age gap takes away any confusion. There's no way I want to be her pal but I am a supportive adult, for whenever she needs to talk to someone. And I think that is easier to hold that ground when there's a big age gap [...]. [Diane]

The issues just discussed strongly relate to an individual factor deserving particular attention: mentor self-efficacy. This was found to be the most influential concept in the ToC and both enabled (42%) or hindered (58%) the realization of desirable outcomes. Many circumstances that undermined mentors' confidence in their own abilities have been previously discussed (e.g., not seeing the hoped-for change, substantial differences, communication difficulties) or can be identified exploring the extended version of the ToC (Supporting Information: Appendix B). Interestingly, two mentors provided additional insights into what can make mentors feel somewhat inadequate:

[...] when you do the training, they show you all these people saying how much they're loving their mentor, how fabulous it is and that it was great. And then, you think: 'Well, mine is just kind of okay' [...]. [Vivian]

It is also worth pointing out that, within this study, female mentors seemed to suffer the most from these confidence issues, appearing far more inclined to deem themselves *"a bit of a fraud"* [Phoebe] or even *"a failure"* [Giselle].

4.6 | Direct logic analysis

The level of consistency across the different bodies of evidence considered is now assessed. In particular, attention is drawn to commonalities and, then, discrepancies between field evidence and research literature as to: (i) mentors' motives; (ii) mentors' gains; (iii) facilitators and barriers of their experience.

4.6.1 | Motivations

As can be seen at Table 2, while both the literature review and the evidence from fieldwork highlighted that the expression of altruistic values was a central motivational factor for aspiring mentors, several differences became evident. For instance, although indicated as extremely important in the body of literature analyzed, the pursuit of understanding or self-enhancement gains (e.g., feelings of being useful and needed or simply good about oneself) was seldom endorsed as a motivation to join the MCR Pathways program. Conversely, other reasons of more limited interest according to extant literature, such as community concerns or the "sensitizing experiences" described before, acquired in the context of this specific program striking salience.

4.6.2 | Positive outcomes

In terms of gains (Table 2), the analysis revealed that these overwhelmingly related to gaining new understandings or a sense of reward, satisfaction and enjoyment. A certain degree of coherence characterizes the frameworks also with respect to the career-related benefits mentors pursued or accrued. This area was largely more addressed in the

TABLE 2 Commonalities and discrepancies between field evidence and extant scientific knowledge[a]

| Motivations and positive outcomes | % of mentors/sources discussing each theme or subtheme | | | |
| | As a motive | | As an outcome | |
	Interviews with MCR pathways mentors[b]	Literature review	Interviews with MCR pathways mentors[b]	Literature review
Values	50%	40%	50%	19%
Understanding	8%	30%	175%	144%
Enhancement	8%	33%	158%	121%
Make new friends	8%	7%	17%	35%
Protective	33%	2%	42%	5%
Career	17% (29%)	21%	58% (100%)	70%
Benefit work relationships	0% (0%)	0%	17% (29%)	5%
Social	8%	7%	17%	21%
Benefit other personal relationships	0%	0%	17%	16%
Civic responsibility	58%	23%	8%	44%
Attachment	17%	5%	25%	33%
Sensitizing experiences	125%	16%	0%	0%
Factors	**As a barrier**		**As a facilitator**	
Fellow mentors	8%	2%	42%	16%
Teachers and school staff	8%	7%	25%	2%
Mentors' family and friends	0%	0%	42%	5%
Normative commitment	8%	0%	42%	7%

[a]Figures may exceed 100% as each interviewee/source could mention more than one subtheme within the themes listed in the table.

[b]Figures in brackets refer only to interviewees up to 55 years old.

wider literature. However, this simply reflects the over-representation, in prior studies, of younger cohorts of mentors (i.e., high school and university/college students). Interview data highlighted a clear-cut demarcation between the mentors who were or not sensitive to these fallouts (up to 55 years of age), confirming how valued they are for those who are still developing professionally. Also, both the documentary and field exploration of mentors' perceptions revealed some less acknowledged and investigated outcomes, such as the spill-over of the experience on mentors' private and working relationships, an area of inquiry future research should pay greater attention to. Nonetheless, the analysis also pinpointed some noteworthy elements of differentiation. For instance, in the context of the MCR program the ego-protective function served by mentoring turned out to be more strongly perceived. Conversely, mentors interviewed reported far less frequently benefits related to establishing new friendships or—less markedly—developing a sense of belongingness to the mentoring group/program or the wider community. This suggests that those managing this scheme may better exploit a seemingly untapped potential of the mentoring experience for fulfilling these needs.

4.6.3 | Facilitators and barriers

Table 1 shows the 10 concepts found to be the most influential or interconnected within the ToC and their relevance within the literature-based CF. As the two sets of rankings demonstrate, consensus was achieved on a number of factors considered most to affect mentors' experience in both the case study presented here and the mentoring literature. These include: actually observing the impacts of the contribution made as mentors; alleviating the feelings of inadequacy that often beset mentors; providing mentors with ongoing support; carefully dosing the degree of within-pair differences. Nonetheless, the LA also highlighted that interviewees more widely discussed four specific themes (Table 2), further discussed here below.

First, some prior studies (Caldarella et al., 2010; Fassetta et al., 2014; McGill, 2012; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010) pointed out that interactions with fellow mentors – in the form of group development sessions (GDSs)—can enhance mentors' learning and overall experience. Within the current investigation, almost half of the mentors acknowledged how beneficial this has/would have been, promising themselves to engage more in the debriefing sessions organized. However, two major obstacles seemed to be overcome: the additional time commitment required to participate and the negative group thinking that may take over during these gatherings, as Eloise described: "I always felt as though people treated them as an opportunity to just moan […] maybe it was just the group that I was in […] I always found that quite a difficult thing" [Eloise].

Second, some mentors spoke favorably about receiving even small expressions of gratitude from the teachers, feeling acknowledged for their time and efforts: "[…] even the teachers actually came along […] and they were very complimentary and appreciative of the support. So … yeah, that's really helpful, I think" [Edwin]. In other cases, the lack of interactions with the school personnel resulted in much less positive views:

> In my experiences, with three different boys, in three different schools, there has not been much
> engagement between the staff and me, as a mentor. […] I feel like sometimes the schools are taking
> advantage of the mentoring system, to grab themselves some spare time […]. [Albert]

Third, another topic largely unexplored by extant literature was the role played by mentors' family and friends, who can supply additional encouragement and reassurance with respect to the mentoring endeavor. The LA added to our understanding in this respect, as all the volunteers who actively sought support from acquaintances while mentoring were those experiencing the greatest stress and anxieties (e.g., at the onset of the MR or dealing with its unexpected termination) and/or who felt less entitled to speak to the PC.

Finally, unlike extant studies, interviewees' narratives far more frequently insisted on what has been referred to as "normative commitment." While a few mentors stated that they would not quit mentoring because the benefits

gained exceeded the indirect costs incurred, others (42%)—who even found the experience stressful or challenging—explicitly referred to this concept:

> I definitely had meetings or days where I was like: "This is haaard!," [...] but quitting just never crossed my mind because that wouldn't have fixed it... you know, it might have made me feel better in the long run, because I removed myself from the situation, but I wouldn't have left the girl knowing that this young person needed [...] someone and I wasn't there for her. [Eloise]

Sharing these findings with representatives from MCR Pathways did not result in changes to the program theory produced. Nonetheless, this step allowed to take note that, although the latter generally held up well in light of the literature, a number of aspects distinctively characterized this program and the profile of mentors it relies on, as well as that some elements of its design or implementation appeared to require adjustments to maximize the gains mentors realize, as recapitulated and discussed in the next paragraphs.

5 | DISCUSSION

The current study examined the mechanisms through which the MCR Pathways program achieves its intended mentor outcomes. Furthermore, it sought to provide important insights for better understanding what may motivate adults to mentor within a SBM program to assist youth in need of extra support and what can help retain their continued involvement. Such knowledge was achieved by engaging in a systematic comparison between the evidence collected on-field and that brought about by extant research literature (so-called Logic Analysis).

In terms of contributions, this study added to a scant body of research that has explored the perceptions and actual experiences of a demographically diversified pool of mentors. Additionally, the findings provided by this paper have significant practical implications, as they can be leveraged to offer mentoring program directors with a series of recommendations on how to: (i) recruit; (ii) retain growing numbers of volunteers. In what follows, we first highlight the study seven main implications as respectively concerns these two distinct strategic areas of volunteer management. Next, we elucidate three ways in which the present study added to the relatively narrow body of mentor-centric literature, contributing to the progress of the scientific knowledge in this research field. Finally, we discuss its three main shortcomings, while highlighting some steps by which forthcoming studies can attenuate them.

5.1 | Contributions to practice

5.1.1 | Mentor recruitment

Study participants not only discussed gains aligned with their original motives for mentoring (i.e., realized motivations) but also a wide range of unanticipated positive outcomes, so that stated gains, overall, outstripped both the reasons to volunteer and negative consequences experienced. Prior research has widely stressed the importance of seeking direct insights from mentors on their initial motivations, to better help them meet their goals and satisfy their needs (Caldarella et al., 2010; Stukas & Tanti, 2005; Stukas et al., 2013; Teye & Peaslee, 2020). Nonetheless, according to mentors' self-reports, the positive outcomes perceived appeared to be, in most of the cases, neither intentionally sought at the moment mentors signed up nor seen as a potential by-product of the experience. This leads to consider two scenarios. On the one hand, some psychological or cognitive biases may have caused interviewees to omit a number of motivating factors. This can particularly hold true for evaluations that—as in this case—rely on retrospective accounts rendered by participants. Under such circumstances, it cannot be ruled

out that some of the outcomes valued ex-post may have been actually pursued all along. On the other hand, if we assume that study participants reported, at the best of their abilities, all the drivers of their decision to join the program, we would be facing a genuine lack of awareness about all the benefits that mentoring could afford them. This cannot be ruled out either, as prior studies (Bond et al., 2008) show that, commonly, individuals undertake personally relevant decisions overlooking a significant part of objectives later identified as influential. In this second perspective, it may well be that the primary motivations that prospective mentors—in a given context—report (or even perceive) keep falling within certain prominent domains (in this case, "Values", "Civic Responsibility"). Despite this, outreach, awareness-raising and recruitment campaigns should aim at making interested individuals increasingly cognizant—from the very outset of the engagement/decisional process—of the wide spectrum of gains attainable, as this can add further compelling motives for getting involved.

5.1.2 | Mentor retention

As anticipated, the study also produced several insights into possible routes to offer actual volunteers an increasingly rewarding experience. In this respect, study participants often put forward interesting pieces of advice, revealing that they would benefit from greater attention being awarded to prevent or address some specific challenges identified. Albeit cognizant that our results are not indiscriminately generalizable, the six points below present a set of recommendations which specifically regard the facilitators and barriers previously introduced. Mentoring organizations can assess applicability to their own programs.

Supervision and staff support
In some cases, mentors felt uncomfortable about requesting discussions with the PC. As some interviewee suggested, such a problem can be solved by including short, yet default and periodic catch-ups, especially for—but not necessarily limited to—novice mentors:

> [...] especially in the early weeks, it should have been kind of standard that, after each mentoring session, you have a phone call or a meeting with the coordinator established, just to talk through what happened at the meeting [...] I felt like maybe if there'd been a kind of automatic check-in point that would have eased that. [Celine]

Differences with mentee
Other recommendations regarded the match-making process, in its interaction with recruitment activities. Although not a widely raised issue, Sally felt less capable than a man would have been to help her male mentee work through some issues, concluding that greater participation from men should be sought. This also suggests that, in the absence of available/suitable male mentors, focusing on commonalities (in interests, backgrounds, personalities) while matching participants may become particularly crucial to the success of mixed pairs. This may also be the case with intergenerational matches. Additionally, even with some cautions—in light of the pitfalls that may characterize co-mentoring structures (e.g., Dolan & Johnson, 2009) —coordinators may consider to designate a vice-mentor with the desired expertise and life experiences, to assist with well-defined tasks or issues.

Seeing the change and mentors self-efficacy
Findings also suggest that PCs should do all they can to mitigate mentors' inclination to blame themselves if things do not go as well as expected or there is no apparent positive impact. Furthermore, they should avoid at all costs to unintentionally add to such feelings, as happened to Vivian:

[...] I've found quite upsetting that, when I spoke to the organizer, she was very unhelpful, she wasn't helpful. I felt that she was quite defensive and [...] when I raised these concerns, I was sort of blamed for it, you know, like it was my fault. [Vivian]

Moreover, female mentors appeared to be far more prone to feel faulty, and to doubt or even blame themselves in the face of setbacks. Although the limited size of the study sample prevents from talking about gender differences in experiencing impostor feelings, future enquires may seek to ascertain if, in wider populations and similar contexts, women turn out to be actually more susceptible to them.

Equally relevant, interviewees' words revealed that success stories, albeit inspirational, are not devoid of side effects, and may make mentors whose MR struggles to take off feel even worse. Hence, it is advisable that novice mentors are made fully aware of the challenges they may face which can help them formulate more realistic expectations and endure in the longer run (Madia & Lutz, 2004; Stukas et al., 2013). From a practical standpoint, program administrators may consider exploiting the training sessions to downplay the issue: other mentors can act as testimonials and describe the worst situations faced, possibly showing that difficulties are part of the game, rather than a fault, and can be positively overcome.

Fellow mentors

This introduces the following recommendation: escalating the opportunities for volunteers to seek advice and emotional support from fellow mentors. Congruent with other studies (Marshall et al., 2015; Raven, 2015), results from the current evaluation suggest how important it is to provide ample opportunities to interact with other mentors and support each other. Indeed, mentors tapping into this resource often results in a series of positive outcomes: from a greater openness toward people from diverse backgrounds and ability to deal with them, to alleviating any feeling of loneliness and isolation when facing certain struggles. Nonetheless, program managers seemed called to remove two main barriers. First, mentors widely spoke about the difficulty to allocate time to this activity, which may indicate the need for providing more frequent but shorter sessions. Secondly, as also discussed by J. M. McGill (2012), moderators should carefully manage emerging group dynamics. While sharing concerns, frustrations or disappointments is key to lessening any distress and risk of burnout, a proactive and positive attitude should still permeate intergroup interactions.

Teachers and school staff

With respect to the contact with school personnel, prior research has brought mixed results. For instance, Aresi et al. (2021) found teacher support to be unrelated to mentors' self-report of the MR quality. By contrast, Raven (2015) saw these stakeholders as vital to the success of SBM programs, as their feedback can help mentors recognize improvements in the mentee's behaviors, attitudes or academic achievements, boosting their confidence and sense of accomplishment. Findings from the current study fall someway between these two extremes and indicate that the simplest expression of appreciation from educational staff can make the difference between feeling valued and neglected or taken advantage of.

Mentors' acquaintances and sense of normative commitment

Study participants seemed to seek support, encouragement and guidance from people close to them primarily when subject to an excessive emotional burden and/or when they perceived they had reduced access to discussions with the PC. Also, as well-known (Aresi et al., 2021; Caldarella et al., 2010; Gettings & Wilson, 2014), mentors—although unsatisfied—may feel pushed to persevere due to the desire not to let down the mentee. The sense of "normative commitment"—widely detected among interviewed mentors—may be simply reflective of how strongly other-oriented they are or, alternatively, cast some doubts on the amount of personal benefits volunteers derived. Overall, it seems appropriate that attention is paid by mentoring agencies and researchers to these two aspects, first and foremost to better understand if they actually represent early signs of distress and dissatisfaction or of dysfunctions to redress as to the relationship established with the PC.

5.2 | Contributions to research

A first, important step forward is represented by having theoretically framed the assessment of mentors' motives and outcomes through an abductive process, thus refining the theoretical assumptions articulated a priori based on their fit with field evidence. Hereby, the study validated motivational or outcomes domains (e.g., "Values" motives or "Understanding" and "Self-enhancement" gains) already documented as prevalent in the mentoring field (Bufali, 2022). However, it made original contributions by uncovering three novel categories of motivations which stand outside established theoretical frameworks (Clary et al., 1992) and are less explored or reported in extant studies, yet particularly salient in the context of the program being evaluated. These include the community concerns, "sensitizing experiences" or the desire to develop sentiments of belongingness that led many interviewees to approach mentoring. Additionally, in concert with previous research (e.g., Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; McGill, 2012; Meltzer & Saunders, 2020), the study further evidenced that mentoring often impacts other personal relationships in the mentors' lives. The evidence about these emerging themes is surely informative as regards the collective narratives around mentoring in this specific research setting or, possibly, even the backgrounds of the pool of mentors most drawn to this particular program. However, it also suggests interesting areas of inquiry that future research could better address. Moreover, it further supports the case for deeming the VFI a too narrow instrument to account for all the functions served by mentoring (Bufali, 2022; Teye & Peaslee, 2020). The analysis relied on qualitative data to provide rich insights into the varied range of mentors' motivations and outcomes, describing in depth the content domain of these dimensions of mentors' experience. Future studies can build on this groundwork to design ad hoc survey measures or probe the applicability of pre-existing ones with a view to quantify the key constructs and links emerged.

Equally important, the study raises several novel evaluation questions. Although the variety of positive impacts documented is reassuring, the LA evidenced a number of potential negative outcomes and feelings associated with the mentoring experience. Given the paucity of research directly examining these fallouts of participation (only 7% of the studies included in the review), more exploration seems highly warranted. Similarly, as anticipated, there remains a need for continued research addressed to explicitly articulate the processes at work that may explain how outcomes—either positive or negative—result. In this respect, the LA provided some clarifications about the numerous factors that may influence the initial decision to volunteer, the outcomes accrued, as well as the intent of mentors to renew their commitment to mentoring. It also shed light on meaningful directions for future research, such as more thoroughly investigating potential gender effects in the exposure to impostor feelings or better structuring the understanding of the role played by teachers, mentors' acquaintances or normative commitment.

Moreover, the study developed a common framework to build on both the evidence yielded from current scientific knowledge of mentor experiences and the fieldwork conducted. The modeling approach put forward can be leveraged by other mentoring agencies to evaluate their own schemes. Moreover, it is believed that the composite theory-building process adopted in this research offers several advantages over alternative practices. For instance, the knowledge synthesis embedded in the tables clearly showed the discrepancies between the program being evaluated and the wider pertinent literature. In consequence, a number of "development opportunities" (Deane & Harré, 2014) for the MCR Pathways program were revealed, such as more explicitly representing mentoring as a way to answer community concerns or capitalize on one's own past experiences, as well as increasing the chances for mentors to develop friendships or sentiments of belongingness. Also, the specific role played in this context by teachers, mentors' acquaintances and normative commitment was so exposed. Additionally, albeit aware that more linear and parsimonious models (McGill, 2012; McGill et al., 2015) may be more attractive to end users, cognitive mapping provided a very detailed representation of the mentoring process (Supporting Information: Appendix B), displaying how discrete processual elements influence each other and when/how to intervene to achieve the intended outcomes. In conclusion, both the instruments employed for knowledge synthesis served as a platform to assess the legitimacy and coherence of a program-specific ToC against the academic literature. Precisely because of this systematic comparison, we could gain a sound understanding of

whether and to what extent the design/implementation of a program diverged from the standards endorsed by pertinent literature, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the corrective actions addressed to maximize its impacts.

5.3 | Limitations and directions for future research

The study also has limitations and some sources of bias that should be considered when interpreting its findings or conducting fresh evaluations, which may take the suggested steps to mitigate them.

First, as with qualitative and non-positivist research, the size of the study sample was not set striving for the generalizability of results. As such, while the matrices give a sense of the relative prevalence or salience of each concept, making inferences about the trends in the larger population of MCR mentors or gender/age differences solely based on these counts would be inappropriate. Future studies can replicate the analyses and challenge the conclusions drawn by involving larger, more representative samples.

Second, participants were interviewed at one point in time, which may have resulted in some difficulties to provide a precise and exhaustive account of their entire mentoring journey. Especially regarding the reporting of initial motives for participation or the early stages of the experience, recall bias could have been at work. Nonetheless, probes and prompts directly brought to the attention of respondents a set of anticipated motivations, outcomes and factors they may have struggled to recall. However, future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, gathering information before mentors engage in the process.

Thirdly, the study rests on participants' self-reports, opening doors to social-desirability bias: interviewees may have provided responses considered more socially acceptable, which may result in a flattening of reported themes. This particularly applies to the exploration of behavioral intentions, as individuals may have felt encouraged to place particular emphasis on altruistic motives for volunteering or overstate their intent to follow through. Nonetheless, following Shye's (2010) tips, to alleviate this bias, interview questions initially referred to the broader category of mentors and, only subsequently, to the interviewee's personal experience.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The research reported here offers insights of great interest for program practitioners and evaluation researchers concerned with volunteer management within SBM programs. Ultimately, the study makes a convincing case to contribute time or financial resources to SBM programs. Also, it helps to inform the work of those designing and conducting fresh evaluations. Indeed, a great deal of its original contribution to SBM empirical research consists of having put forward a robust and novel PTDE approach deemed particularly promising when it comes to: (i) investigate hitherto little-explored issues (namely, the ways in which volunteers navigate the mentoring experience); (ii) promote open discussions on them amongst program stakeholders; (iii) offer a point of departure in the process of establishing and demonstrating program success as to the management of volunteer mentors. In conclusion, the method proposed can turn out to be a decisive instrument to gain a solid understanding of the forces triggering and sustaining mentoring in the school setting. As such, it can enhance the effectiveness of the management practices adopted by mentoring organizations to recruit and retain volunteers, maximizing the chances that they—like mentored youth—reap the desired benefits.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Maria Vittoria Bufali: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; writing – original draft preparation; writing – reviewing and editing; visualization. **Graham Connelly**: Conceptualization; writing – reviewing

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

ORCID

Maria Vittoria Bufali http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2875-1063

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://publons.com/publon/10.1002/jcop.22991

REFERENCES

Aresi, G., Pozzi, M., & Marta, E. (2021). Programme and school predictors of mentoring relationship quality and the role of mentors' satisfaction in volunteer retention. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *31*(2), 171–183.

Banks, K. H. (2010). A qualitative investigation of mentor experiences in a service learning course. *Educational Horizons*, *89*(1), 68–79.

Banxia Software Ltd. (2017). Decision explorer® user's guide, version 3.5.0.

Bayer, A., Grossman, J. B., & Dubois, D. L. (2015). Using volunteer mentors to improve the academic outcomes of underserved students: the role of relationships. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *43*(4), 408–429.

Bond, S. D., Carlson, K. A., & Keeney, R. L. (2008). Generating objectives: Can decision makers articulate what they want? *Management Science*, *54*(1), 56–70.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Brousselle, A., & Buregeya, J. M. (2018). Theory-based evaluations: Framing the existence of a new theory in evaluation and the rise of the 5th generation. *Evaluation*, *24*(2), 153–168.

Brousselle, A., & Champagne, F. (2011). Program theory evaluation: Logic analysis. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *34*(1), 69–78.

Bufali, M. V. (2022). *Making sense of and valuing volunteering: on the edge between theoretical perspectives and managerial or evaluative practices. a multi-study, multi-method dissertation*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Strathclyde]. Stax. https://stax.strath.ac.uk/concern/theses/9880vr34c

Caldarella, P., Adams, M. B., Valentine, S. B., & Richard Young, K. (2009). Evaluation of a mentoring program for elementary school students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. *New Horizons in Education*, *57*(1), 1–16.

Caldarella, P., Gomm, R. J., Shatzer, R. H., & Wall, D. G. (2010). School-based mentoring: A study of volunteer motivations and benefits. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *2*(2), 199–216.

Cavell, T. A., Gregus, S. J., Craig, J. T., Pastrana, F. A., & Hernandez Rodriguez, J. (2018). Program-specific practices and outcomes for high school mentors and their mentees. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *89*, 309–318.

Center for Theory of Change. (2022). What is theory of change? https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., & Ridge, R. (1992). Volunteers' motivations: A functional strategy for the recruitment, placement, and retention of volunteers. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *2*(4), 333–350.

Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., Ridge, R. D., Copeland, J., Stukas, A. A., Haugen, J., & Miene, P. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*(6), 1516–1530.

Coyne-Foresi, M., Crooks, C. V., Chiodo, D., Nowicki, E. A., & Dare, L. (2019). Teaching them, teaching me: Youth conceptualize benefits of being a mentor in an indigenous high school peer mentoring program. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 27(5), 531–548.

Deane, K. L., & Harré, N. (2014). Program theory-driven evaluation science in a youth development context. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 45, 61–70.

Dolan, E., & Johnson, D. (2009). Toward a holistic view of undergraduate research experiences: An exploratory study of impact on graduate/postdoctoral mentors. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 18, 487–500.

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560.

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2014). "Systematic combining"—A decade later. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(6), 1277–1284.

Dubois, D. L., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. C. (2011). How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, Supplement*, 2, 57–91.

Eden, C. (1988). Cognitive mapping. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 36(1), 1–13.

Eden, C., Ackermann, F., & Cropper, S. (1992). The Analysis of Cause Maps, 29(3), 309–324.

Elli, S. W., & Granvill, G. (1999). Intergenerational solidarity: Bridging the gap through mentoring programmes. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 7(3), 181–194.

Ernst, & Young. (2015). Mentoring: At the crossroads of education, business and community.

Fassetta, G., Siebelt, S., & Mitchell, I. (2014). *Transforming lives: The first two years of the MCR Pathways mentoring programme.*

Ferro, A. L. (2012). Measuring and understanding distal and proximal determinants of the mentoring relationships quality in Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based programs. In *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository* (Issue Paper 749).

Gettings, P. E., & Wilson, S. R. (2014). Examining commitment and relational maintenance in formal youth mentoring relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(8), 1089–1115.

Grossman, J. B., Chan, C. S., Schwartz, S. E. O., & Rhodes, J. E. (2012). The test of time in school-based mentoring: The role of relationship duration and Re-Matching on academic outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(1–2), 43–54.

Grossman, J. B., & Rhodes, J. E. (2002). The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 199–219.

Harris, J., & Nakkula, M. (2008). Match Characteristics Questionnaire, v2.22.

Herrera, C., Grossman, J. B., Kauh, T. J., & McMaken, J. (2011). Mentoring in schools: An impact study of big brothers big sisters school-based mentoring. *Child Development*, 82(1), 346–361.

Herrera, C., Kauh, T. J., Cooney, S. M., Grossman, J. B., & McMaken, J. (2008). *High school students as mentors.*

Hughes, C., Boyd, E., & Dykstra, S. J. (2010). Evaluation of a university-based mentoring program: Mentors' perspectives on a service-learning experience. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(4), 361–382.

Hughes, C., & Dykstra, S. J. (2008). University students' expectations for mentoring high-poverty youth. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 1(1), 21–32.

Hughes, C., Steinhorn, R., Davis, B., Beckrest, S., Boyd, E., & Cashen, K. (2012). University-based service learning: Relating mentoring experiences to issues of poverty. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(6), 767–782.

Hughes, C., Welsh, M., Mayer, A., Bolay, J., & Southard, K. (2009). An innovative university-based mentoring program: affecting college students' attitudes and engagement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16(1), 69–78.

Lee, J., Germain, L., Lawrence, E., & Marshall, J. (2010). "It opened my mind, my eyes. It was good." Supporting college students' navigation of difference in a youth mentoring program. *Educational Horizons*, 89(1), 33–46.

Madia, B. P., & Lutz, C. J. (2004). Perceived similarity, expectation-reality discrepancies, and mentors' expressed intention to remain in big brothers/big sisters programs. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34(3), 598–623.

Marshall, J. H., Lawrence, E. C., Lee Williams, J., & Peugh, J. (2015). Mentoring as service-learning: The relationship between perceived peer support and outcomes for college women mentors. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 47, 38–46.

Martin, S. M., & Sifers, S. K. (2012). An evaluation of factors leading to mentor satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(5), 940–945.

McGill, J. M., Adler-Baeder, F., Sollie, D. L., & Kerpelman, J. L. (2015). Exploring the experiences of female emerging adult mentors: Building a conceptual model. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 30(5), 538–564.

McGill, J. M. (2012). *The Young Women Leaders' Program: Exploring Factors and Outcomes Associated with Emerging Adult Female Mentors' Experience.* (Degree of Master of Science).

MCR Pathways. (2017). Impact Report 2017. MCR Pathways: Helping Young People realise their full potential through education.

Meltzer, A., & Saunders, I. (2020). Cultivating supportive communities for young people—Mentor pathways into and following a youth mentoring program. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 110, 104815.

Monk, M. H., Baustian, M. M., Saari, C. R., Welsh, S., D'Elia, C. F., Powers, J. E., Gaston, S., & Francis, P. (2014). EnvironMentors: Mentoring at-risk high school students through university partnerships. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 9(4), 385–397.

O'Shea, S., McMahon, S., Priestly, A., Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Harwood, V. (2016). 'We are history in the making and we are walking together to change things for the better': Exploring the flows and ripples of learning in a mentoring programme for indigenous young people. *Education as Change*, 20(1), 59–84.

O'Shea, S., Harwood, V., Kervin, L., & Humphry, N. (2013). Connection, challenge, and change: The narratives of university students mentoring young indigenous Australians. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 21(4), 392–411.

Pryce, J., Giovannetti, S., Spencer, R., Elledge, L. C., Gowdy, G., Whitley, M. L., & Cavell, T. A. (2015). Mentoring in the social context: Mentors' experiences with mentees' peers in a site-based program. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 56, 185–192.

QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018). NVivo 12 (released in March 2018).

Raven, N. (2015). The impact of mentoring reconsidered: An exploration of the benefits for student mentors. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 20(3), 280–295.

Robson, C., & McCartan, K. (2016). *Real World Research* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Rubin, A., & Thorelli, I. M. (1984). Egoistic motives and longevity of participation by social service volunteers. *The Journal of applied behavioral science*, 20(3), 223–235.

Schmidt, M. E., Marks, J. L., & Derrico, L. (2004). What a difference mentoring makes: Service learning and engagement for college students. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 12(2), 205–217.

Shye, S. (2010). The motivation to volunteer: A systemic quality of life theory. *Social Indicators Research*, 98, 183–200.

Slaughter-Defoe, D., & English-Clarke, T. (2010). Mentoring in the Philadelphia GO-GIRL Program: Impact on Penn's graduate school of education student mentors. *Educational Horizons*, 89, 80–92.

Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., Walsh, J., & Drew, A. L. (2017). Breaking up is hard to do: A qualitative interview study of how and why youth mentoring relationships end. *Youth & Society*, 49(4), 438–460.

Strapp, C. M., Gilles, A. W., Spalding, A. E., Hughes, C. T., Baldwin, A. M., Guy, K. L., Feakin, K. R., & Lamb, A. D. (2014). Changes in mentor efficacy and perceptions following participation in a youth mentoring program. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 22(3), 190–209.

Stukas, A. A., Clary, E. G., & Snyder, M. (2013). Mentor recruitment and retention. In D. L. Dubois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Stukas, A. A., & Tanti, C. (2005). Recruiting and sustaining volunteer mentors. In D. L. Dubois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 235–250). Sage.

Stukas, A. A., Worth, K. A., Clary, E. G., & Snyder, M. (2009). The matching of motivations to affordances in the volunteer environment: An index for assessing the impact of multiple matches on volunteer outcomes. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(1), 5–28.

Terry, J. (1999). A Community/school mentoring program for elementary students. *Professional School Counseling*, 2(3), 237–240.

Teye, A. C., & Peaslee, L. (2020). Why mentor? A validation study of the volunteer functions inventory for use in youth mentoring. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 48(3), 1040–1058.

Tracey, D., Hornery, S., Seaton, M., Craven, R. G., & Yeung, A. S. (2014). Volunteers supporting children with reading difficulties in schools: Motives and rewards. *School Community Journal*, 24(1), 49–68.

Trepanler-Street, M. (2007). Mentoring young children: Impact on college students. *Childhood Education*, 84(1), 15–19.

Vareilles, G., Marchal, B., Kane, S., Petrič, T., Pictet, G., & Pommier, J. (2015). Understanding the motivation and performance of community health volunteers involved in the delivery of health programmes in Kampala, Uganda: A realist evaluation. *BMJ Open*, 5(11), e008614.

Wasburn-Moses, L., Fry, J., & Sanders, K. (2014). The impact of a service-learning experience in mentoring at-risk youth. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25(1), 71–94.

Weiler, L., Haddock, S., Zimmerman, T. S., Krafchick, J., Henry, K., & Rudisill, S. (2013). Benefits derived by college students from mentoring At-Risk youth in a ing course. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(3–4), 236–248.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.